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August 31, 1897.

No. 1049.

Five Cents a Copy.
\$2.50 a Year.

BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
92 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Published Every
Tuesday.

Vol. XLI.

Queen Edna, of the Panthers.



THE QUEEN AND HER PETS.

Queen Edna, of the Panthers;

OR,

CYCLONE SAUL'S SEARCH.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "THE DUDE DETECTIVE," "THE ALL-AROUND SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FOUR WEIRD GUIDES.

"Friend or foe?"

"You say. I'm not hunting hard for either."

"Call your cats to heel, and we'll talk the matter over."

"Wouldn't do a bit of good. They are running this thing to suit themselves. I reckon they mean you well, but I wouldn't swear to it. I'm alive, and that's the best I can say for them."

The young fellow lounged back as he spoke, and the four panthers looked around them with that far-away glare in their eyes which means more than the observer knows.

Out on the plain Tom Calvert, the first speaker, was reining in his calico mustang, which snorted, and gave other evidences of discontent at the presence of unwelcome neighbors.

Had it not been held by a firm and fearless hand, it would doubtless have bolted at the first discovery of the strangely assorted quintette, of man and catamounts.

"Well, say, are the brutes tame?"

"You say. I'm still outside."

"If you can risk them, I guess I can."

If they are going to make trouble, two to four renders the odds a shade better. I'm coming in."

"All right! May as well have the circus now as later on, and I'd just as soon have you for a pard as any other stranger. Leave your cayouse out there, though. There is water here, and he won't go far from it, if his looks count."

"Right you are," answered Calvert, springing down, and speaking a low word or two to the mustang, which had somewhat recovered from its terror.

Without apparent uneasiness the young man strode forward.

The panthers arose, stretched themselves, and glided toward him. A trifling mistake about the temper of the usually untamable brutes might make trouble beyond remedy.

The young fellow on the ground never offered to rise, but rolled lazily over to the right, which action brought his right wrist across the butt of the Winchester, over which, a moment before, one of the animals had been crouching.

In a second he could begin work!

Calvert was, if anything, cooler. His bright eyes met those of the brutes as they advanced, and there was in the smile with which he received their advances both distrust and preparation; but in a moment he spoke:

"There's no mistake about it; the kittens are glad to see me. If I couldn't swear to the other thing, I'd say they were old friends. What does it mean?"

The beasts actually were fawning at the feet of an utter stranger, and he pushed them aside with a "glad-to-see-you-but-get-out-of-the-way" air.

"Reckon it means they aren't hungry. Along toward morning will be the time to say what else. They may go for us; they may be satisfied with horseflesh. The cusses were so everlasting friendly I couldn't bear to give them a shock; but, I would just as soon they had business somewhere else."

"Looks to me as though they were lost; but, that's a tough theory. They must have a friend somewhere that has trained them up to the queen's taste. Let them go till they show different colors. Which way are you drifting? It's a blessed thing to strike a man here who looks as though he would do to tie to."

"Thankee! Your humble servant is out on the make, but might not object to a pard. My name is Saul Sanders; otherwise Cyclone Saul. Present avocation, a hunter of a hidden treasure. If I'm not mistaken, you are right on the same line. Chances are, both will go up the flume before we reach the richness. I'm young in years, but I have a veteran head. If you say, 'pards,' here's my hand."

"I have heard of you, and there's no one I would sooner have met. As to treasure—I've got one in view, but it's not the same as yours, I'll be sworn. Help me and I'll help you. As for filthy lucre—I've got all I need of it, so there is no danger our interests will clash."

The two gripped hands while Calvert was speaking.

Here, on the edge of the desert, with no sign of human habitation or life about them, was a good place to make a quick friendship, and each looked as though he was fit to be near the best.

"Can't imagine what brought you here, all by your lonesome self, unless it was some such scent as drew me; but if you say not, we'll let it go till you're ready to say more. Perhaps we're not headed the same way, after all. As I said, I'm not yearning for a pard; yet, I'll take one of the right stripe."

Calvert smiled, though it was a trifle nervously, and gazed into his companion's face a few seconds before answering:

"Oh, I may as well own up first as last. There is a woman in the case. This seems like a hard road for you and me to travel; what must it be for a delicate girl?"

"Short cut for lunacy. Has she got it bad?"

"I do not know. We have never been near enough for her to give me her confidence—perhaps I went over the line when I dared to urge one who was a comparative stranger to turn back, offering, if there was need, to take her place."

"Bet you a dollar she didn't think so. But, don't it strike you she may be on the line I meant to follow? She's not exactly alone, is she?"

"No. She has a companion who seems to know the way. Though I followed at a distance, after being actually driven back by her words, and imagined I had done so carefully, he must have discovered me, and acted accordingly. The trail has vanished, and I am in doubt which way to turn. Perhaps your way will be as well as any."

"Companion, eh? A little, gnarled old man, who looks like a walnut log with a big knot on the end, and stuck up on two dead limbs?"

Calvert smiled again, this time at the earnestness of his companion and the mental picture his words called up.

"Something very like to that. He evidently had no love for me. I should hate to meet him alone, where all the advantage lay on his side."

"So you ought to if he drew a bead on you inside of a thousand yards. At that distance, or under, old Planthunter is perfect death. Didn't give you any clear idea of which way they were going?"

"No, except that the journey was long and dangerous."

"I believe you, my boy. It must be so. The Planthunter has been gathering something more than herbs. But, I do not understand the woman."

"Confound it, I don't see how you came to understand anything at all about it. I just begin to see how strange it is. What do you know about the man you call Planthunter?"

"Keep your soul in patience; I'll tell you later on. Our friends, the big cats, are beginning to be impatient, and it may be as well to keep an eye on them. I never did trust the breed."

During the brief conversation the panthers had been drawn up in a line at some little distance, watching the two after a fashion which seemed to bespeak intelligence of no low grade.

Now, they acted as though uneasy at the conference. They looked at the two men; then back at a narrow opening which led away among the rocks. Three of them whined, while the fourth advanced a step or two, eyeing the stranger after an expectant fashion.

"Looks as though they wanted to say something, and weren't exactly sure about the best way of doing it. What is it, old fellow? Play me fair, and I'm your solid friend. Play me foul, and you'll find trouble in the family."

Saul spoke carelessly, but Calvert detected in the tones a something which said the young fellow meant what he said, and would not be trifled with. The adventure began to look more than ever serious. To this very moment he had not been able to convince himself that Sanders was altogether in ignorance in regard to the brutes and their owner. Had he felt as uncertain at the first he might have had more uncomfortable feelings than the ones which began to press upon him just now. He looked them over closer.

"They mean to be on their good behavior; but, all the same, they intend to have what they want. Can't you guess what that may be?"

"I made a guess at that long ago; but I wasn't just sure. And if I had been I would have thought twice before I went their way."

"You mean—?"

"That they want us to follow them. See! That big one is saying it as plain as day can be. Get over your prejudices and they are just like overgrown dogs. Fact is, I'd sooner meet them than wild canines of the same weight. Shall we follow?"

"Follow?" echoed Calvert, hesitatingly, yet more than half convinced. "Where do you suppose they would lead?"

"That's the rub. It may be their owner is in a tight place and has sent them off for help. Then, again, it is just as likely they will take us into a trap of some kind. There's too blamed much intelligence in the big one's eyes. I'm half inclined to dismiss them with my blessing."

"And I say, follow. There seems to be too wonderful a chance in this to slight it."

"Follow goes, if they show us a lead. Here, you brutes, strike out! We are with you till the dawn."

He snapped his fingers, and gave a gesture that told the animals to go ahead. At the same time his hand slipped along the stock of his Winchester until the hammer was under his thumb. If this friendliness was all pretense, he was ready for the time when the mask dropped off.

The panthers saw, and, apparently, understood, for they leaped playfully into the air, tumbled one over the other in

sport, and then, glancing over their shoulders to make sure they were followed, gamboled along the narrow way which led between the rocks.

CHAPTER II.

A MAGICAL DISAPPEARANCE.

The four panthers strode on ahead, with a low, lounging gait, never looking to the right nor the left, and apparently oblivious of the two who toiled on in their rear.

As for the pair, a night and a day had passed since they had turned away, as they thought, from the edge of the desert, and they looked much the worse for wear.

Saul Sanders had lost his air of jaunty self-assurance, while there was a half-dazed look on Tom Calvert's face. If they had been walking automatons they could not have plodded on in a more mechanical way.

Yet, they did not have a conscious feeling of being tired. Although they had eaten but sparingly from the haversack at Calvert's shoulder, neither was hungry, and the one canteen was not near exhausted, though they had been sharing its contents between them on a journey which under ordinary circumstances would have filled them with a burning thirst, though with unlimited springs to draw from.

At times they still talked, though it was more and more seldom that one addressed the other. For half an hour neither had spoken. Then, the voice of Sanders arose above the low sound of their feet crunching through the gravel.

"More than you bargained for, pard," he murmured, in a strangely even tone.

"Don't it strike you there's something mighty queer about all this thing?"

"Queer or not, I'm going to follow it to the end. Go back if you want to give it up; I'm enlisted for the war."

"That's just it. I feel the same way myself. But, how did we come to enlist?"

Calvert stared straight ahead. The question had no interest for him.

"Supposing I drew a bead on the high mogul of our guides, and dropped her cold, don't you think it would bring matters to a focus? I'm not exactly scared, but I'd like to know what this is all about."

"We agreed to follow, did we not?"

"Yes; but we didn't say we wouldn't stop."

"Stop, then!"

"Confound it, I don't want to stop, and that's what makes me warm. Are we both fools?"

Calvert had no answer ready. Indeed, he wanted none. The further he had gone the less he felt like stopping, and though they had taken some hours of rest the previous night, in a natural state he would have wondered why it was that he could drag one foot after another.

Saul Sanders was affected in somewhat the same way, but he did not yield so readily to the possession.

Like Calvert, he had no desire to halt until he had come to the end of the journey, but curiosity was not altogether dead within him, and had his companion been willing to discuss the matter he might have speculated more deeply, concerning what he began to see, if not entirely realize, was a mystery.

The interest he had shown, however, was but momentary. Soon he was plodding on again as grimly and silently as ever.

By and by they came to a huge pile of boulders, apparently thrown up in some

convulsion of nature, yet almost fashioned as if by the hand of man.

An arched recess, that, to unfettered eyes, would have looked cool and inviting, wooed them to rest; and, as it appeared, with success.

Calvert staggered within its shadow and threw himself down upon a sandy floor, that made a couch fit for a king, to his strained senses.

Saul followed more deliberately. He was conscious their guides had vanished, and he was not at all certain this was not their den. The climax might be near at hand.

He took a sitting posture, with his back against the rock, and his gun resting across his knees. His face turned to the opening, and he was ready to shoot on sight.

Yet, for all of this precaution, he closed his eyes, and before a moment had seemed to pass he was asleep.

Tom Calvert was already snoring.

How long the latter slumbered he could not have even guessed. He awoke suddenly, and with all his senses about him save his memory—if that could be called a sense.

He looked around him, wondering where he was and how he had got there.

The last he remembered was standing at the edge of the desert, talking with an unknown young man, while four panthers were cutting antics that were somewhat strange. Where were they now? Had he and his companion dared to go to sleep with such dangerous guests near? Undoubtedly, he had just awakened; while propped against the wall, his gun in his hand, was the stranger.

A slight rustle near caused him to turn his head toward the opening into the arch. Was it the light footfall of one of the beasts of prey? His hand dropped to his revolver instantly, and he was on the alert.

At the same instant a flood of light illuminated the recess, and he saw a figure moving toward him which was surely human.

It might have risen out of the ground, so mysteriously did it appear, and his fingers unloosened from the butt of his pistol as he recognized a woman!

From her side a shapely arm rose, until her forefinger pointed straight at him, and without a word from either the two looked at each other.

The woman was still young.

And beautiful! He had never imagined anything half so bewildering as that magnificent face which looked down upon him with a royal air of command, though the expression was not altogether unkindly. He scarce noted the clinging garments of purest white, or the one great diamond which blazed like a star just above the line where her midnight hair, and low, broad, white brow met. His eyes dropped under her magnetic gaze, and he bowed low before her, with hands clasped.

"Come!" she commanded, and, turning, floated away, as it seemed to him.

In front of her the solid rock appeared to open, revealing a narrow, but brightly lighted passage. Springing forward, Tom Calvert followed the swift-moving figure, never appearing to notice that the rocks had come together again in his rear, and before they closed the panthers dropped in behind him.

Just at that moment Saul Sanders was rubbing his eyes, to dispel what seemed to him a singular dream.

To his mind, it appeared, it certainly must have been a vision, since the recess was now altogether dark; and how could there have been a woman there, talking with his friend?

He spoke, and his voice had regained its careless, confident tone.

"Say there, Calvert, where are you? Something must have hit me a rap on the head, for I have been seeing more stars than you could shake a stick at. Where the deuce are we, anyhow?"

No answer came, and the youth rubbed his face thoughtfully, trying to bring back the particulars of what appeared almost, if not altogether, like a fading dream.

"If I wasn't in a strange place, and no other way to tell how I got here, I'd swear there never was such a person as Tom Calvert, and the four cats were a picture on a circus bill that I saw in the years before I struck this beastly country. Maybe I've ben wandering in the bad lands, and lost my head. Let's see how this thing pans out."

Muttering so to himself, Saul fumbled in his pockets, and produced a box of taper matches.

Carefully he ignited one of these, and held it up, while he peered around.

There could be no dream about this. He saw the same arched recess of which, a few moments before, he had a glimpse; but at the further end nothing but solid rock met his view.

"When a man begins to see things like that, it is pretty sure his brain's not in tip-top running order. The sooner I get out into the open and take my bearings the better. Canteen don't seem to be empty, and there's still something—hello! Where did the haversack come from? Don't seem to be exactly a dream, after all."

Sure enough; here was an article which certainly was not his, yet it swung across his shoulder as though it belonged there. He stumbled out into the open air and looked around him.

Behind him rose the huge pile of rocks, a strange, inexplicable landmark. Everywhere else, as far as he could see, was the level desert, shading away into gloom, despite the star-hung heavens above.

"There's the guide stars to the left, pointing straight to the north star, and here comes the night wind on the right, up from the south. I have been tramping in a dream, but all the time as I wanted to go. To-morrow I will keep on. Nightfall will find me at the land of the sunken canyon. The work has begun fairly well. But the stranger I met last night, an hour before sundown—he puzzles me. Will we meet again?"

CHAPTER III.

VISITORS IN THE VALLEY.

Two persons were camped in a dingle.

One of them was a wizen-faced, bent little man, of age so great that it began to be uncertain, though his little, brown eyes gleamed brightly over the thick growth of hair which covered his face.

He was clad in a suit of brown buckskin, well worn by long service, and in the belt around his waist swung a knife and revolver. A repeating rifle was always near his hand, if not actually in it, and he gave the impression of one ever on the alert from some expected, but hidden, danger.

His companion was a girl-woman, of perhaps nineteen. Her figure was not too slight, though supple and swaying; her face showed the bright hues of health through the brown which sun and wind had given it.

Her costume also was of buckskin, but richly beaded, and might have been made for an Indian queen; while her slender, shapely feet were cased in moccasins.

No Indian was she, however.

Her eyes were a soft brown, and her hair, which fell over her shoulders in a mass of soft, regular curls, was a chestnut-tinted bronze.

"Stiddy, gal! Ett won't do ter be too brash. We're a doin' well. Ett's more years ner you hev numbered sense I war in these regions afore, an' I don't know who's kim sence. Ef thar's men hyer, most like they ain't ther kind you an' me wants ter meet 'thout lookin' over ther ground aforehand."

"But, why this delay? The whole day I have spent here, while you have hardly ventured a mile beyond this spot. Yet we have seen no signs that any one but ourselves has penetrated this wilderness."

"Speak fur yerself, gal. You hev'n't. But my old eyes kin see writin' your'n ain't used ter. We spent a heap ov time so fur, an' made good progriss. I ain't throwin' ett all away. Recommember ett's your safety I'm figgerin' fur. Ef I war by meself little I'd keer fur foe, er stranger, I mout find in this kentry."

"Yet, if we find any one, it is a chance that it will be the one man I would most yearn to see if I could have hopes that he still lived."

"Don't furgit thar are others. He mout not kim alone. Trust Planthunter, gal. Yer ther fust livin' bein' I've cottoned to en a long, long time, an' I'll kerry yer through er turn toes up; but I got ter take my time an' way."

"And you are sure it is not all a fable and a dream? That there is such a place as the one I have described?"

"Sure and sart'in. These old eyes hev seen it, but it war many an' many a year ago. In a day er two I kin show ett to yer, most like. Ett's a hundersome, deserted ruin, set in a valley, an' when I war thar no foot ov man had trod ther inside fur ez many years afore. Wish I war sure ett war ther same way sence. But, I've hed warnin's an' seed sights. I told yer all about 'em at ther start, an' ett ain't wuth while ter go over 'em ag'in. P'rhaps I'm wrong—mebbe no. But ett won't hurt ter be sure."

"For how long are we to remain camped here?"

"Not fur ez long, mebbe, ez we'd o'rter. Ther moon are growin', an' ef yer thinks yer hez ther stren'th we may go for'ards. Thar's a hidin' place ez I recollects, ez we kin strike along a leetle afore mornin', an' thar we'll lay low, onless ther way looks cl'ar fur shore."

"To-night, you say? Why not now? I am so tired of this waiting!"

She raised herself to her full height, and stretched her arms above her head, speaking to herself in a low tone:

"To think, after all this time of silence and doubt, this message should come to me out of the sea: 'A strange adventure. A partner, and yet a slave in a strange region once described by a man who wandered, and who called himself Planthunter. It may mean death, or it may mean unbounded wealth. There are others, more desperate than I, but she rules them all save their leader. What the end will be I dare not say; but if it is life and wealth, it is all for you, my child.' So his letter read, and, knowing that all this danger was for me, what less could I do than find him? He is bewitched, enchanted, and I will come to break the charm. What will be the cost?"

She was silent a moment as she thought. The question had its terrors. Then, she drew herself up once more:

"What can come but victory and joy? Speed hours; come moonlight; welcome

the unknown; let the gates of enchantment open! Arla Earl walks to her birthright!"

With the flush of hope on her face, and her eyes glittering in the light that comes from the chance of realization, she stepped firmly out, as though she was going on her way at once.

But Planthunter was not looking at her. He was gazing down to where the walls of the glen seemed almost to come together. There seemed something there more interesting than the antics of a moon-struck maiden.

"Quick, quick!" he suddenly exclaimed, in a low but shrill tone.

"Ett's them four devils, ther witches!" Ef they git eyes on ye ye'r lost. Mebbe we kin throw 'em off ther trail, even yit. This way!"

He caught the girl who had called herself Arla Earl by the hand, and bounded away.

She had no idea of what caused the sudden panic, but was too wise to hesitate. Indeed, such a contingency had been provided for beforehand. When they first rested at this spot, Planthunter marked out the line to be followed if retreat should be necessary. In a moment they were gliding along, well hidden from the entrance to the glen by intervening rocks, and gradually rising above the level of the little valley.

"What was it?" whispered Arla, after a little, when she saw her guide had moderated his pace, and seemed to be somewhat over his panic.

"Don't ask me, gal. Mebbe it war all foolish on my part. But ett kim on me ov a suddint, an' I jest bruk away ter be on ther safe side."

"Are you sure, Planthunter, that you did not for a little lose your wits? You said something about four devils, and some witches. What was it you meant, if your words had any meaning at all?"

"Don't ax me, fur I can't most likely tell. I've heared ov 'em; an' wunst I seed 'em, but they warn't on my trail. Lucky fur me; but more pity fur ther poor cuss they war after."

"Ah! What happened to him?"

"Death happened ter him. An' he war ez wideawake a redskin ez ever wore bear claws. I didn't know what they war after, er I'd a tried ter take a hand in afore it war too late. Mebbe it ain't me they's lookin' fur ag'in. When we gits up 'round yander bend we'll look down an' see. Ett can't do no hurt. An' though I doubt ef it'll do ary good, I might try a shot on 'em, ef they looks like closin' in."

Planthunter pointed forward and made a gesture for silence. He had already looked to the rear, and seen they were not immediately followed. Arla caught his hand again, and by his side pushed for the spot.

Up there they were a hundred feet or more above the level of the valley, and gazing between two rocks had a fair view of the place they had just left.

They had little baggage, and had left none of it behind. Even if some prying meddler had been there, it was little trace of their presence that could be found.

No one was there, and Arla could not help but notice that Planthunter took what must have been a long breath of relief at the very instant that he turned his gaze swiftly to a further point.

There was some one else in the valley, though it did not seem one whom they should fear.

A young man came striding down the very route by which they themselves had come.

He moved with a steady, tireless gait, and his rifle lay over his arm, the thumb of the other hand resting upon the hammer.

Careless though he seemed, he was ready for a surprise, and Saul Sanders had the look of one who would give a good account of himself in whatever affair he might be embroiled.

Suddenly, the hammer of his rifle went back. It seemed to the two above they could hear its angry click rising sharp on the evening air.

Then, four crouching figures stole forward, and halted at his very feet, their progress all the time watched by the youth!

"Ah, you're there again, are you? This time you don't get away from me until I see what it means. Where's my chum? Not inside. Lou don't look fat enough for that. Lead me to him, and if there's no harm done, I'll call it square. You hear me?"

The four panthers waited and listened. It seemed as though they understood every word. When Saul was done speaking they whined good naturedly, and turned. They did not need to go through the antics which they had performed at that other meeting. Without hesitation Saul Sanders followed.

The two watched the strange scene in silence. A word while it was going on might have turned sharp eyes, or sharper ears, in their direction. It was only when the four had passed entirely from view that Arla spoke.

"In the name of heaven, what is the meaning of this? Who was that young man? Are those brutes his pets? or, if not, to whom do they belong? Should we have spoken to him?"

"Don't ask too much, leetle gal. Yer can't prove none ov them by me. Ef ther yarns ov them sed kin be trusted ett's a bad thing fur ther boy; but I can't make out ett war our place ter warn him. Them an' him hez met afore. Let's foller."

Arla made no objection. She, too, seemed to be under something of a spell. The two retraced their steps, and together went down the valley.

CHAPTER IV.

FRIEND AND FOE.

Tom Calvert had been classed in his time among the "good-for-nothings," but it was by those who knew little of the real Tom, and saw only what lay on the surface.

As a rule, he did not wear his heart on his sleeve, and he had no intention to devote his life to something which he did not care about.

Why should he, since he had a fortune sufficient to provide for his wants during life; and as he had never yet drawn upon the capital, it seemed likely he would have a comfortable little plum to leave behind him at his death.

His trip to these regions was originally planned to serve certain purposes of his own, and though he had extended it a little, it was not for the sake of reckless adventure by any means, though a cooler, braver young man it would be hard to find.

Unless the reader has missed it very widely in his guess, however, it was not cool bravery at all which led him to accept the adventure offered him in the crypt in the desert, though under almost any circumstances he would hardly have refused to follow the guide who so strangely appeared to beckon him on.

He did not hear the rocks come together again behind him, nor did he

note that his late guides were now bringing up the rear.

All he knew was that the white-robed figure was flitting down the corridor in advance, and that he felt as though he must follow, though never for a moment understanding why.

Bewildered as he was, he hardly took any account of his surroundings, and did not note the gradual descent of the passage in which he found himself.

There was sufficient light for him to have noted that the way was apparently cut out of the solid rock, and was illuminated in some concealed manner, which would have suggested to him an electric plant, ridiculous as the idea might have seemed.

Yet, why should that have seemed ridiculous? Why should anything appear so after the strange manner in which this adventure had begun? The journey down the passage was but a matter of a few hundred feet—something stranger yet was to follow.

The way ended abruptly in a little quay, where the female halted and clapped her hands. She stood on the brink of an underground stream, which flowed through an arched way, and at her signal a boat shot up to the quay. A torch burned in the bow, and the oars were pulled by a brawny-shouldered man, whose head was drooped downward, until his face seemed almost to rest upon his breast.

Lightly the woman stepped on board, and pointed to a seat in the bow.

Without a word Calvert took the place, and the boat, shoved off into the centre of the current, dropped swiftly down the stream.

The light in the bow was so near to Calvert that it rendered all things ahead but vague and shadowy, even had he cared to peer forward. He preferred to look back at his guide, whose black eyes reflected the torch light, and the cape she had thrown around her shoulders shone red as blood.

Away back he might have seen another light. A second boat was just leaving the landing place where he had embarked.

The current of this underground river was sluggish, but the oarsman was brawny, and swung to his work with a skill and certainty which showed he was no stranger to the place. In utter silence he sent the boat along, evincing no curiosity in regard to the freight, which it seemed could hardly have been expected.

Transported after this fashion, knowing nothing of where he was going, and caring less, Calvert felt, as though in a dream, that the boat finally drew up alongside of another such a landing as it had left, and that the same being he had followed so blindly was bidding him leave it.

Without curiosity, without fear, he followed, ascending just such another passage as that by which he had reached the river.

Again a door flew open at the approach of the woman who led, and now they were in something which took on the nature of a regular building, though the passages were cold and cheerless.

At last the two entered a room half a dozen yards square, and here everything took on a different tone.

A cheerful, mellow light suffused the apartment, which was furnished comfortably, if not with actual elegance. In one corner was an easy couch.

Calvert cast himself down, and his eyes closed. Instantly he seemed to be in deep sleep.

The woman watched him with a strange smile, and after a minute wait-

ing came and stood over him. A few mysterious passes she made, a lingering look was given at his face; then she turned and left the apartment.

Immediately afterward the sound of a shooting bolt told that he was prisoner as well as guest.

Hours passed, and Calvert slumbered on.

A casual observer could have noted that this was not a hypnotic trance, but the sleep of profound exhaustion.

Finally, the clanging of a door aroused him.

Whether it was day or night he could not tell, but the room was as light as though the sun, which was really shining outside on the world, had penetrated to the place of his confinement.

He rose from his couch and looked around him with a bewildered air.

The things which had puzzled Saul Sanders back in the crypt were as nothing to the astounding mystery which had wrapped a veil around Tom Calvert.

He knew nothing of where he was, or how he had come there, and had not even the remembrance of a supposed dream to guide him.

It was not strange that his first thought was that he had lost his senses, or that his surroundings were unreal.

The journey through the desert and the adventure of the subterranean stream were alike unremembered. The last thing he could call to mind was the discovery at the edge of the desert of a strange youth, around whom were grouped four panthers. It must have been at that moment his hallucinations began. They were phantasies, just as this was one.

Was it, though?

He arose and looked about him more closely.

Everything about him was new, and outre. Everything, that is, save a substantial meal which garnished the table placed under an illuminated and illuminating globe, pendent from the high ceiling.

The sight of that recalled him to himself more thoroughly than anything else could have done.

At that moment he knew he was sane, in his right mind, and very hungry, also.

As for doors and windows, there were positively no signs of any, and when he went to a spot where instinct seemed to tell him there should be an opening, his hands came against solid rock, well though it had been concealed behind curtains.

Hastily he made the circuit of the room.

Everywhere the same result!

He broke into a laugh.

"Reminds me of one of those diminishing cells they used for the accommodation of state prisoners, who found in the end their walls were very pressing. Let me take the measurement of the pen. Perhaps there may be something of the kind intended here.

Roughly he measured the length, breadth, and height of the room. Then he threw himself down on a seat at the table, and fell to with a right good will, his hunger rising as he attempted to satisfy his appetite.

"Ah," he said, at last, "were my unknown entertainer to appear, I think I could meet him in a fairly reasonable frame of mind. He may take certain precautions to avoid the loss of his silver, but he certainly knows how to set a royal spread for a man who has just discovered himself to be starving. Who can he be? It is about time he should show himself."

He drew back from the table leisurely,

and glanced around the room once more with a satisfied look. He was young, and having been well fed, was for the moment at peace with the world.

Last of all, it happened that his glance rested upon the spot where he had first essayed to find a door.

As he looked the curtains were torn apart, were thrown violently back, and on the threshold of the doorway which showed around him appeared a terrible figure.

A man it seemed to be, with shoulders a yard across, and a fierce, ogreish-looking head, set on a thick, squat body. The lips of this intruder were parted in a savage grin, which showed fang-like teeth; the fingers which clutched the curtains were long and curved like talons.

If Tom Calvert was surprised at this apparition, the intruder seemed no less so.

For a moment he glared, as he stood there, as though uncertain whether to believe the evidence of his senses.

Then, his hand darted to his girdle, and a long blade flashed out.

"Ah-ha! Treachery!" he snarled; and with a half-smothered growl flung himself at the young man!

CHAPTER V.

IN THE HEART OF THE MYSTERY.

The intruder was an ugly-looking customer, but Tom Calvert, under ordinary circumstances, was cool and brave, and knew how to defend himself as well as the best.

An unpleasant thought had struck him at the very first, and he would not have been surprised if a mild-mannered man had appeared and told him he was in a lunatic asylum.

The suspicion came back to him now with ten-fold power. In this roaring fiend he fancied he recognized the kingpin of their lunatics.

That did not make the situation any the less serious. He was alone with a madman, and the madman not only had an ugly looking knife, but seemed determined to use it. Fortunately for him the light which illuminated the room was even brighter than the day, and his vision was as keen as that of a hawk.

He steadied himself, moving out a little, even, so as to be clear of the table, and tried to fix the eye of the coming madman.

He failed in that, but he was quick enough of eye to see the stroke as it began to descend, and a swift side spring saved him.

Without a word Calvert drew his shoulder back, and then let go with a swing.

He had never known how hard he could hit, but, as his life depended on it, he struck as hard as he knew how; and reached the spot for which he aimed.

The stunted giant went over backward as if he had been shot, while the blade dropped to the floor. Calvert's first movement was to pick up the knife.

Although it was a risky thing to do, he congratulated himself that he had been willing to trust to his muscle and nerve rather than to his revolver; but he wanted no more of it. With only a glance at the motionless mass of humanity, he darted for the spot where, it seemed to him, the curtains on the wall had but barely ceased falling. Behind them he expected to find the opening by which his assailant had entered.

Disappointment.

Once more the wall was as smooth as though no opening had ever existed there. He was locked in with a madman; or, he had gone mad himself.

No use to look elsewhere. It was here the hallucination appeared; if there was no outlet there, then none existed.

He went straight back, and firmly felt of his captive—for such he determined to make him.

No imagination, this. Here were flesh, blood, and bones. He placed his fingers on a pulse which still beat, and marked that this insensibility would not be apt to last long. He tied the huge wrists together, slipped a pillow from his couch under the square, bristling head, to make the man rest more easily, and then seated himself in his chair, determined to wait for the revival he saw was coming fast.

The man gave a groan, and as he did so darkness pervaded the room, so thick it seemed as though it might be felt.

Calvert's wits were growing sharper as he needed them. The meaning of the disappearing light flashed across him. The intention was to remove the body without allowing him to see how it was done, nor by whom. Here was his chance.

Softly he sprang over the body, and made his way toward the wall. When he felt the curtains he raised them and slipped under, standing close to the rocks in which the opening was to be made.

It was not a mistaken guess.

Silently the hidden door swung open, and he heard a faint rustle of garments as some one slipped within the room. An instant later and he had slipped out.

Still darkness; but he turned at once, and with one elbow touching the wall on the outer side, and his other hand spread out before him, to fend him from any obstacle which might be encountered, he ran lightly along a stone-floored corridor.

Whither he was going, what hope there was of escape, he had not asked himself.

Perhaps he imagined dimly that if he reached some other part of the building he might find some one in authority, to whom he might explain matters somewhat. Or it might be he hoped to make his exit altogether, and discover from a safe distance how it was he had come there.

It was well for him he had kept one hand ahead of him as a guide.

It saved him from running violently against a stone wall when he came to a turn in the passage. As it was, he was thrown back somewhat sharply, his left elbow losing contact with the guiding wall, and he came very near to falling.

He attempted to re-establish the touch, but the more he edged to the left the more confused did he grow, and the more unsettled in his bearings. It seemed to him the wall could be no longer there. He spun around and around, like an expiring teetotum, twisting himself this way and that, and no wall did he feel; but suddenly, right in his face, there came up a cold, damp current of air, which made him feel sick with the knowledge of barely escaped danger it brought him.

He knew without seeing that a chasm was open at his feet, and a step forward would have brought him into it.

Then, he heard the swift patter of light-running footsteps, and the soft swish of feminine garments. As he listened that sound ceased, but almost immediately there was a low clap of a pair of hands, and the call of a soft voice:

"Ahab!" it said. "This way, Ahab! Where are you?"

"Here."

"What happened? Is he safe?"

"A stroke of lightning. The master lay on the floor as if dead, and never

moving. I dragged him out and closed the door behind. It was lucky I stumbled over him where he lay. He will live, though. He was reviving when I left him. His hands were bound together, and I left them so until I could ask for orders. Besides, I did not care to be the one to loosen them. He may do that for himself, and I will live longer."

"And the other. What of him?"

"I know nothing. It was dark, and I neither saw nor heard him."

"I forgot. The light. Go and turn it on. We must risk the chances. If he finds the young man before I reach him he will kill him. Quick! I will attend to the rest—unless you hear the bell."

The conversation was hasty, and though it told Calvert something, it explained nothing. The one speaker was a woman; Ahab was a servant. Who the squat lunatic might be they had not said, but they were evidently much in awe of the mysterious "he."

Meantime, he remained standing on the brink of an open pit, which for the moment he had almost forgotten. What was he to do?

The answer came unexpectedly. Without warning there was a sudden illumination of the place, and he found he was in a long hallway, while right at his feet was a stairway, descending to another similar corridor, which was also lighted by what Calvert naturally understood to be electricity.

He hesitated, it is true. Did the stairway lead toward the ground floor, or deeper? It was a matter of some importance if he desired to make his escape from the building, but the absence of all windows gave him the idea that he might already be underground, and he decided not to attempt to go lower down until he had explored a little further.

Nevertheless, he did lean over the opening, and then it appeared to him he heard voices in the distance, rising in a confused murmur, as though there were a number of speakers.

"Guess the best place to make my appearance is not where the patients are all at breakfast, if I want to receive respectful attention. As well be caught wandering around in the vestibules. They might turn me out by mistake; and if they didn't, they would be willing to listen to my opinion of the gentleman who invaded my room. I'll keep on in the way I am going—if I can find it."

The proviso was a good one, for, on looking about him, he was utterly unable to decide where might lie the cell from which he had escaped. While he glanced from one hand to the other, in deepening doubt, he received a surprise.

A female figure came into sight—and halted almost at the moment.

He did not recognize the newcomer, though he thought of the voice he had heard in the darkness, calling for Ahab. What seemed strange was that the woman acted as though she recognized him. It would have appeared stranger yet if he had been told that on this same face he had stared not a dozen hours before, and had been swift to do the bidding he then received.

She waved her arms—and he could see they were white and shapely. If her gestures meant anything, it was that he should fly—should hide.

Why? And where was he to go?

As if for answer an unseen door opened in the wall almost at his hand, and though uncertain he would accept the place of refuge, he stepped within the casing thus disclosed, and awaited results.

He was not a moment too soon.

He heard a wild, savage cry, saw the woman slip aside and out of sight, and then, peering cautiously around the blocks of stone which sheltered him, had a glimpse of the sawed-off Hercules who had invaded his former apartment.

He was rushing forward, a pistol in his hand; while by his side ran another, as repulsive looking and equally well armed.

Calvert had seen enough. Just now, discretion was the better part of valor. He might be brave as the bravest, but without more knowledge of where he was he did not care to join issue with the inmates of this strange prison.

He slipped within the room—which was as well illuminated as the other had been—and with his own hands closed the heavy door. There was the snap of a bolt, and he realized that once more he was closely confined, without the least idea of how to make his exit.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CASTLE IN THE VALLEY.

When morning dawned on Saul Sanders, after the disappearance of his lately made friend, he spent some little time in trying to find out in what way the missing had been lost. If he could have realized more thoroughly that such a person had really existed, the search might have been more persistent.

The desert around him gave no certain trace and the tumbled mass of rocks seemed to hide no secrets beyond the recess in which Saul had passed the night.

He knew well enough he had no time to lose in lingering there, and puzzled by a mystery which for the present he saw no means of solving, he turned his face southward, in the direction in which lay the region he had styled the land of the sunken canyon.

On the way he had time to do a good deal of thinking, and the events of the past few days began to shape themselves more and more clearly as he reasoned them out.

"Pear to have been under some sort of a spell," he muttered.

"Those cats I thought I had dreamed about were the sure-enough thing; but why I didn't drop a bead on them when they came in sight is more than I can tell, unless there was some witchery about them. And this Calvert? What sort could he have been that we should have tramped together all that way without my remembering more about him; or, that I should have taken up with a man who would leave me at last in the lurch like he did? Lucky riddance. The search I am on wants no sharer. If the danger is mine, so will the profits be—if there are any."

He was thinking some such thing as this as he came down into the little valley through which he expected to reach the land of the sunken canyon; and then, upon the scene came again the four panthers, with their brazen, wheedling ways.

And he did not shoot.

He had no fear of them; and there was a suspicion that they had more to do with Calvert than he as yet understood.

Again they invited him to follow; and again he obeyed.

This time, however, he was, if possible, more on the alert than before; nor was it on account of the beasts themselves. They had been fed since the separation; and until they hungered he had no fear they would attack him. It was the intelligence which directed them that he suspected, and intended to discover.

There was some one beyond him, and his intrusion might, probably would, be resisted with force and guile. Of what sort would the fight be, and how would it end?

"Strange," he muttered to himself, "that I should have found those few faint footsteps, which turned me aside. They vanished a little further on, but the direction remained. It led me right here. If there is anything in the thing I am on the right track, or I never will be. Now, as long as my guides go on I can follow. When they stop it will be time for me to take to the brush. Ah!"

The panthers went on, but he saw something which caused him to stop.

The valley was coming to an end. At least, the walls, which had been shutting him in, began to widen apart, and shade downward. It seemed he was about to debouch upon a plain, and he wanted to see what was ahead of him before coming into sight. He stole to one side, and was glad to see that his guides went straight forward, never seeming to notice his deflection from their course.

A little later he gave a second and more emphatic gesture of surprise.

He had gained a point where he could obtain a view such as he had not dreamed of. Twilight was not far off, yet there was a plain view of what lay ahead of him for miles, and in the distance he saw something which at once riveted his attention.

Lying low in the hollow of the great, bowl-shaped plain was a huge, massive building.

It was too far away to make out every part with distinctness, yet, unless it was a case of mirage, there was no doubt in the mind of the young man as to what it was. This was no fantastic grouping of nature's fashioning, but something made by human hands.

"There it is," muttered Saul, holding his two palms above his eyes, to obtain a better view.

"Not just where I can step into the front door with the first stride; but located so there's no getting away. Wish I was near enough to see if there's any signs of life about it; but all looks dead from here. It was a true yarn, as far as this goes—if the rest pans out as well! A cool—million I was going to say, but what is that? Millions, many times over. The hidden treasure of the ages; and all mine."

There was exultation in his tone, and he spoke louder than he thought.

"Stiddy, lad!"

At the sound of the voice a hand dropped upon his shoulder.

"Ett's me, old Planthunter. Hope what words I sed wunst ain't bin ther means ov brungin' yer hyer."

The face of the young man flushed. He had been surprised, for one thing; and the surprise was an unwelcome one for another.

He recognized the voice at once, and had no need to turn slowly around to know that it was really Planthunter who spoke. He remembered now what Calvert had said, and was not surprised when he saw the old man was not alone.

Only a moment did he hesitate.

His hand came out with a frank gesture, while the lines of discontent left his face as suddenly as they had come there. He told nothing but the simple truth when he spoke:

"Old man, I'm glad to see you. I'm on a trail I heard of from you, but what you said could not have put me on it. Yonder is the deserted castle you told me once of having visited. I thought then I would see it some day, and I am here

now. Before I go back I will know something of other mysteries about it which you never mentioned. If you and your friend are here on the same errand, there is no reason why we should not go together. If you share the dangers there is no man living with a better right to share the reward, and I reckon you have no patent on the whole preserves."

"I dunno clear what yer talkin' about. Fur ez I kin say I'm not objectin', but I'm not ther boss ov this outfit. Hyer's ther one ez kin say ef we pulls tergeth-er, er you hev ter trudge ett alone. I'm enlisted fur ther war, an' am fightin' fur her side."

The two young people had been eying each other, and though the old man and the young man joined palms in cordial pressure, they both looked at Arla.

She held out her hand in turn to the stranger.

"Any friend that you can vouch for, Planthunter, is worth the having, and his mission, if he has one, cannot interfere with mine. Who do you expect to meet there?"

She nodded toward the building in the distance, and her hand dropped from Saul Sanders's grasp to her side.

"No one, I hope. And you?"

"My father, if he still lives. If dead, perhaps some traces of his presence."

"Your father!"

"Yes. It is too long a story to tell you here—some other time I will explain, if you care to hear. To-night, if we would reach yonder fortress, we had better be moving."

"An' I say, best to hunt a hole, an' draw ett in arter us, tell we sees. Thar's s'uthin' myter'us in ther air. Ther three cats, boy—whar did yer meet 'em afore? Does yer know what they reely are?"

"I scarcely can answer," responded Saul, a troubled look on his face. "Unless it was all a dream, I must have seen them; they even guided me here, strange as it may seem."

"Beware ov 'em lad. They's witches, more ner human, let erlone brute. Avoid 'em, lad. They means harm, an' they allers kills."

"Perhaps you are right. I am as brave as the most, but I don't know that I care to tramp over their trail by moonlight, if they have seemed most infernal friendly. But, if they meant us harm, you can't throw them off the track. I haven't had the heart to draw a bead on them when they seemed so trusting—more like human than beast. Perhaps it would have been better to have dropped them where they played."

"Ef yer could, yonker; ef yer could. I'm a thinkin', though, ther lead ain't run ter do ther work."

"All this means, you want to lose time," interrupted Arla, impatiently. "So be it. Hide, if you think best. You shall not say I drove you into danger you did not care to risk."

"She's a leetle onpatient, lad, but she'll do us right when morning comes. One ov us kin scout down to'ards ther old rooins ter-night, an' mayhap bring good news thet'll save hours ter-morrer."

"No!" impatiently, and with a stamp of the slender, moccasined foot.

"No one shall face the danger unshared by all. To camp! Let us return to the spot whence we have just come, and this young man shall be our guest. Hereafter I see no reason why our ways should not lie together until the mystery of this valley is explored."

Planthunter was not averse to following the advice, and he looked around him.

Though it might not be possible to deceive animals so keen of scent as the

four which had led the way down the valley, yet he made some effort, laying a false track out beyond several convenient boulders, over which he climbed on his way back, leaping from one to another with an agility scarce to be expected from one of his years.

Then, the two others were swung up, and they took a higher path for some distance, from which they eventually dropped to the trail they had used before.

Thus they returned to the dingle, and from there ascended to the point from which Planthunter and the girl had caught sight of Saul Sanders.

It was a backward move, with no foe in sight, but it was done in the interests of safety.

The hours went along without alarm; and the valley seemed to be untenanted by any save themselves. Arla slept soundly, and the boy and the man conversed in low whispers. Boy and man, at least, when age was compared, though Saul had many a time borne a man's part in closer corners even than this seemed likely to be.

Planthunter continued to be uneasy.

From time to time he looked down the trail which led to the open plain; and finally would have crept away in that direction.

"My mind misgives me, yonker," he murmured. "Begins ter look ez though we's on 'chanted ground. Watch over her an' I'll creep down ter whar ther rocks overlooks ther cas'sel. If I seen speerits comin' I wouldn't be much surprised."

"Not so, Planthunter. Your place is with the woman you have promised to protect. I will go. You can trust me; and you have told me of the land till it all seems plain. If anything happens, think nothing of me. I am proof against witches and goblins. I am more afraid of finding flesh and blood, brought here by the scent of treasure. Be watchful."

He threw his rifle to its customary place in the hollow of his arm, and glided away.

Night was around him, but above were the stars. They broke into the gloom of the canyon, though they shed no light on the dark lurking places, where the rocks hung over, and the rays of the moon, swinging low toward the west, could not reach.

Nevertheless, his way was easy, and out on the plain all was silent. He lingered there for some time, wondering to what end he had come here, and finally made his way back as cautiously as he had come.

Near to the camp he halted, wondering if his ears had deceived him, or if really he heard a sound.

Silence followed for a second. Then, as he raised his foot to go on, a rifle cracked among the rocks above. "Help!" pealed out a voice.

There was a crouching and a worrying in the sounds that next he heard, and with a cry of anger he dashed on and upward.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT THE STREAM HID.

"It is witchcraft; it is enchantment!"

So Saul exclaimed when, wearied and wrought upon by a fruitless search, he gazed stupidly around him, half believing that once more he had been made the mock of phantoms.

No sign was there of the two with whom he had been camping; not a trace to show there had been such a conflict as he had imagined.

When he dashed up the activity he could have sworn that at the least he would find a bleeding corpse, and come face to face with the uncanny trio he began to think might be invested with supernatural powers.

No corpse was there to be found, nor any traces of blood.

Careless of the danger it might bring to himself, he called aloud the name of Planthunter; but there was no answer. He ran along the path until he found that it was tenantless, except by himself, and was but a back trail, which led him toward the opening into the valley. He returned to the spot where he had left girl and guide, and renewed his search.

He knew the missing ones had not come down into the dingle at the point where he stood when he heard the cry, and was certain if they had followed the path as he found it they would have come into his view. There must be some outlet which he had not yet found.

Leaning out between the two rocks already spoken of, he at last found what promised a way of advance. A ledge below offered him a foothold, and without waiting to make sure whither it led or if it would be an easy matter to return, he swung himself over, and, letting go with his hands, dropped lightly to the ledge.

Naturally, he balanced inward, intending to support himself against the rock; but he had not taken into account what he might find, or fail to find, below.

The wall was no longer there when he reached the ledge, and pawing wildly at the empty air, he toppled backward, and went plunging downward, he knew not where nor whither.

As he fell the four panthers, in single file, tiptoed noiselessly forward, out of the near-by shadows, and stared down into the opening which had received him.

Then, they turned, and went stealthily along a narrow, squarely cut path, which ran southward toward the plain. It seemed as though their mission was done.

As for the chasm which received Saul Sanders, it was one of nature's own making, and therefore all the more singular in its purposes.

In the brief time he knew he was falling he had opportunity to think a great deal, and to make up his mind he was doomed. Nevertheless, he turned himself as he fell, and went down feet foremost.

Almost immediately there was a splash; and he found himself cleaving through the waters of a dark and sluggish stream.

A weaker-nerved person might have fainted from the revulsion, for even in that first moment he knew no bones were broken and no great harm done. With the skill of a practiced diver, he checked his descent under the water, and came to the surface as light as a cork, turning upon his back, so as to look up toward the sky and the twinkling stars he had left behind him.

No stars were there, and he felt himself surging along in a darkness such as he could not have known in the outer world. Over him it flashed that he had left that world behind him when he fell, and that these were the waters of the Sunken Canyon—of the stream of which he had heard, but had never fully believed in.

The opening through which he had dropped was already far behind him; and if he could return to it, he doubted if it could do him any good. There was nothing for him but to float on, and on, until the end came. He was doomed.

Yet, with a courage which was little

else than despair, he never lost his head. He even closed his eyes, to shut out the realizing sense of the darkness, and thrust one hand far forward, as rudder and fender, while he swore to himself that when he went down at the last it would be after a hard fight for his life.

So the moments drifted; and he with them. Luckily for him, he had dropped clear of his rifle, since instinct would have held to it, and it would have dragged him down. The revolver at his waist was beginning to count as to weight, and he thought of casting it overboard.

More than once he thought of veering to the right or left, and seeking the shore, but as often preferred to remain in the centre current. Of what use to waste strength and hours clambering in the darkness, where nature showed no outlet?

Long though the time was that he floated, it seemed much longer. Cramps began to twinge his extremities, and a cold chill swept over him. He opened his eyes, and closed them again, for what he half believed was the last time. He hardly credited his senses when a glow began to creep between his tightly shut lids; yet—as he swept around a slight bend the light grew brighter. Opening his eyes, he thought daylight had come again.

Nevertheless, above him hung the vaulted canyon wall, its rocky face glistening in the light which streamed out from an opening to the one side.

Gone were the cramps and the chill. With a vigorous effort he whirled to the side, and shot up to a stone-built wharf, moored to which was an idly rocking boat, at which he stared, more bewildered than ever.

It told him he was not the only one who traversed these waters; that caution might be as well, in the face of such strange mysteries.

"I have reached the castle, sure enough, and swum the moat, but if the drawbridge happens to be up, and the warder turns a deaf ear, it strikes me I'm in a mighty bad fix. Let's see what's the chance for a storming party."

In such a way ran his thoughts, but he did not despair.

His spirits came back to him as he dragged himself out of the stream, all dripping, and he was glad he had not thrown away his revolver. Despite its ducking, it was in serviceable condition; and he half suspected that before he got through with this adventure he would have use for it.

The time, indeed, seemed to be coming all too soon, for he heard voices and footsteps, which appeared to be approaching by the passage, at the mouth of which he was lingering. He turned, followed a path which led along the stream, and found a convenient niche, into which he shrunk, though he peeped around the rock to see what manner of people they were from whom he had fled.

Two men were on the quay, holding between them a burden of some kind. What it was he could only guess, but it was a bulky object, wrapped in cloths; and with care and labor they took it with them into the boat.

"Drop down the stream a hundred yards before you cast it off!" said a voice which caused Saul to start, for the tones were soft and liquid, as though from the lips of a woman.

The answer came from the boat:

"Have no fear, madam. The work shall be well done. No curious eyes shall see. Come with us if you doubt."

There was a hasty exclamation of impatience, and the boat pushed off. Saul

drew back, for the bow was turned toward him, and he feared he might be seen.

He could hear a grating at the rowlocks, and the lazy drop of oars. The boat slid down the stream, and came into sight. He crouched lower, though his eyes never turned from the sight. Fully a hundred yards from the starting point the oars were shipped. In the shadows the men looked like ghosts as they raised their burden between them.

Once, twice, they swung it, backward and forward, and at the third motion let go, casting it out into the water, which received it with a sullen splash. It sunk almost at once, but as it went down Saul thought he heard a groan.

CHAPTER VIII.

SAUL SANDERS MAKES A FRIEND.

What was the meaning of the scene? Who was the victim? Why was it disposed of in this terrible, hidden way?

Sanders asked himself the questions even while shrinking farther back, despite the curiosity which consumed him.

He thought once of opening fire with his revolver, but he knew not whether it was a case in which he should interfere. As to what his own fate would be if discovered, and he failed to guard his life with his hands, he had not a doubt.

Not a word was spoken by the men in the boat. They leaned forward to watch the disappearing burden, and then thrust their oars into the water and pulled back. They did not care to linger over the spot; and the unseen watcher was not loth to have them go. Under the impetus of their strong strokes the little vessel shot swiftly back, and Saul heard their steps once more on the stairs. They went back again as they came, and for the present he was alone in the canyon. Below him flowed the stream of the hidden river, with the mystery it was expected to conceal.

He stole out from the niche, gave a glance up at the quay, and then his gaze rested on the black water.

"They may be watching it, they may not; if there's a human in that dump there is no time to wait and see. It is almost too late already. Here goes."

It was half a dozen feet down to the face of the water, and a dive would make a sound that would carry far in the silence of that buried stream. He slipped noiselessly down the face of the rock, against which he finally thrust his feet and gave himself a shove which sent him far out into the current.

He believed he had marked well the spot where the burden had sunk, and toward it he swum with long, steady strokes. At the right moment he turned his head downward, cast up his feet, and went under the surface like a loon.

Saul knew that he must depend upon his sense of touch alone, and that it must be chance or fate which would give him success in his efforts.

It was because he thought one or the other would be with him that he was willing to try. He cared far too much for his own life to risk it hopelessly. In fact, he had never realized how dear it was to him until he thought the matter solemnly over while floating down the sunken river.

Now, when there were strange noises in his ears, and his lungs seemed about to close, and he doubted if he could reach the top of the water alive, he trusted to fate, and dove still farther, sweeping the smooth bottom with clutching fingers—which at last closed on something he knew at once was the object of his search.

He sought to raise it, but it held to the bottom like an anchor, and held him with it.

The seconds were fleeting rapidly. He had not many of them to spare. If he loosened his hold now he doubted if ever he could refix it.

And even in that first touch he had learned there was a human body enclosed in the coarse sacking.

"It must be weighted at the one end, he thought, and managed to draw his knife with his left hand. There was risk of harming the victim if he still lived—or, if she—It was as likely this was the body of Arla Earl as that it was of any other.

He drew the keen blade along the rude material, placed the knife between his teeth, and obtained a firm hold on what he knew was a shock of human hair.

After that, he only knew he was fighting his way upward until he came out at the surface, half senseless, but still holding on to his prize like grim death.

The bank, where he had left, was perpendicular, and the crown far beyond his reach. To go back to the wharf would be both dangerous and difficult. Now that he had made his capture Saul hardly knew what to do with it. Sooner or later he might be forced to let it go, and look after his own safety.

For the present, however, he was willing to take some chances, though he knew how severely his strength had already been tried. He swung in to the shore, and suffered himself to drift slowly along, feeling his way as he went.

Now and then his feet struck bottom in the shallows, and once he stopped to rest a moment while he examined his charge.

"It's a man, sure enough," he muttered; "and if I had half a show I'd bring him through. If I'm not way off he's not dead yet. Blame pity that light don't reach here as well as it might."

By this time he was in a dim twilight, which prevented his recognizing more than an outline, and he could distinguish nothing of the features of his burden. He began to think it time for a desperate effort to make his way out of the water; and feeling carefully upward believed he had found the spot where it could be done.

The struggle which followed was the one of his life. Twice he slipped back; as often returned to the charge. It would have been nothing to reach the level above if he had been unincumbered; but he never once thought of deserting his charge after finding it was a human being.

At last, exhausted with his efforts, but successful, he stumbled up on the ledge, and dropped his burden.

For a moment he rested.

If life had depended on it he could not have done otherwise. His hands were numb, his whole frame shook and shivered. As for the man he had brought out, he had but faint hopes that his life could be preserved.

Nevertheless, he settled down to make an effort for his restoration the moment he felt equal to the task.

In his hip pocket he fortunately carried a medicine he saved for emergencies, and it served him in good stead now.

He needed it badly enough for himself, and sampled it lightly. More of it he used on his jetsam.

He chafed the cold wrists; he pressed on the broad chest; he started respiration by a regular motion of the arms, which yielded to his efforts. He tried everything he could think of—and he won, much to his own surprise.

"Confound it, what am I to do with him?" asked Saul, puzzled at the problem next to solve.

"He ought to be wrapped up in blankets for the next twenty-four hours, with considerable careful nursing. He'll die if I keep him here; and if I tote him back to where he came from they'll be apt to kill him again—and me along with him. All the same, I don't want to be with him here in the dark, when he gets right hold of his strength. He might strangle me by mistake. There's the muscle of a Hercules in those arms of his. I'll do the best I can, and if I die trying it won't be my fault."

Thus making up his mind he caught up the body which was quivering with life as it returned, and staggered off toward the light which soon began to glow in the distance.

Few of his weight could have carried the burden as well. Perhaps the exercise and the anxiety were what he needed, to divert his mind somewhat from his own late affairs. He came once more to the landing place, and looked first at the boat, and then at the passage down which had come the men with the burden.

The boat offered him no escape, but only a refuge. The passage was as likely to be the gateway to death. He was tempted to drop his burden for a moment, and explore. At the slight motion he made the burden in his arms came more into life.

"Keep on!" the stranger urged, in a husky whisper. "Stay with me a little longer and I swear you will come to no hurt. Face to face they dare not harm me."

Whisper though it was there was such life in the tone Saul was startled.

He was eager to find a resting place for the man he had so lately considered drowned, and dropped him easily to the ground.

"Into what devil's nest have I fallen? Who are you? What is the meaning of all this?"

"Waste no time in questions now. Complete your work and you will not be unrewarded. Fail me and I cannot answer for your life. Without me one who has opened the mystery of the Hidden River will fare badly. Escape will be impossible, and discovery will mean death."

"It strikes me, considering the plight I just brought you out of, I may as well rely on myself. They don't seem to cotton to you here."

"Face to face they dare not move a finger. It was treachery, black and vile. Give me an hour to become myself again and I'd laugh at them all. I know them now."

"More than I do. What sort of a gang are they, anyhow?"

"Ask me no questions. Enough that I rule them. Make up your mind quick, or it may be I will not need you."

"And then?"

"It will be so much worse for you."

There was too much of threat in the words of the stranger to be altogether pleasing to the youth. His hand went back toward his revolver.

"My friend, I am not sure I have done a wise thing. You threaten early in the game. Go slow or I may take the notion to send you back where I found you. I'll swear it won't be half the trouble it was to get you out."

"No, no! You mistake. I will never forget. But without me you are lost, and I am not fit to defend you now. Help me, and I will show the way. Ah, I will teach them a lesson! Traitor! Such revenge!"

He saw by the light in Saul's eye that the lad had decided to aid him, and at that moment began to think of other things which were beyond Sanders's comprehension, and of which, for the present, he thought it best to take no notice.

"Come, then. Point out the way and I will lead you in it. But, beware of treachery. Try it and you die."

So speaking, Saul assisted the other to rise.

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN'S WILL.

Tom Calvert looked around him when the door bolted, and his laugh was a trifle bitter.

"Can't say I see much profit in the exchange. In fact, it's the other way. My friends must have ordered all the extra frills for my especial benefit, but this is just an ordinary, everyday sort of accommodation. Wonder what the chance is to get out. No better than in the other room, I'll swear."

He told the truth, every time.

As he gazed around, nothing but bare stone walls confronted him, and had it not been for the light which shone here as brilliantly as elsewhere he would have been in a dungeon of the darkest and most cheerless kind.

Fortunate for him was it that he had not been interrupted until he had finished his one meal of the day—no one came to offer him another.

He did not believe he would be altogether overlooked or forgotten, but as the hours wore on it began to look something like it.

"The woman saw where I went," was his mental solace; "and she seems to be one in authority, if she don't boss the whole concern. She will be looking me up—unless that howling maniac should prove too much for her. In that case, who knows what may happen? Thomas, I am afraid you have sent your pitcher to the well once too often. The outlook—or, the want of it—is awfully depressing."

So he reasoned to himself, though, as hope grew less bright, his thoughts took on a more gloomy tinge. He went 'round and 'round the room in search of some device by which he might communicate with some one; but found none. He remembered that in a lunatic asylum it might be supposed there was no need for such things.

Wearied out with waiting he at last threw himself down upon the hard floor and closed his eyes. He swore to himself he would not lose courage whatever might happen; and he kept his word. Eventually he fell asleep.

He awoke with the knowledge there was some one in the room.

Looking up he saw a female figure, and started to his feet. Before him was the same woman who had motioned him to enter here.

He looked more closely, and saw what he was not so certain of before, though he had more than half believed it. She was young and beautiful.

"Pardon me," she said, in a voice which was low and liquid.

"Perhaps I would not have dared leave another man in such plight, but I was sure, if I had not mistaken, it would not harm you. The danger is now past, concerning which I would rather hear no questions. I come to talk of other matters. How is it that you are here?"

"If you don't know, I'll never tell," was the blunt answer.

"And you have no idea?"

"An idea—but if my other suspicions are correct I think it would be best to

keep it to myself. It might interfere with my going away again, which I assure you is the first thing I desire to have on the programme."

"Be not afraid to speak. Tell me, what is the last thing you remember previous to waking up under this roof?"

Calvert stammered, and flushed.

It seemed to him there must be a hiatus which it would be policy not to mention. The last thing he remembered as a remembrance was the strange meeting with Saul Sanders, and the four beasts which were guarding him. After that, there must be a lengthy blank, in which he had got back to a land where they had madhouses, and other evidences of civilization.

"You are afraid to speak for fear the truth may seem ridiculous. Hesitate no longer. Or, perhaps, I can put your thoughts into words."

"If you can I'll be worse mixed than ever."

"No, since I will explain. At the edge of the desert you met my messengers."

"Yours?"

"Yes, mine. They spoke to you without words, and they led you on until you were in safety over the most dangerous part of the road. Had you turned aside you might have wandered into regions where hope never can come."

"I cannot say that I altogether understand. It may be as you say; but why should you have taken the pains? I was doing very well as it was."

"Scarcely so well as you thought. You had made up your mind to the journey, but knew little of the dangers in the way. Without me all your bright anticipations would have been vain. Only through me could you attain the object of your search."

"And you were willing to aid me! Why?"

He looked curiously at the woman, and it seemed to him he could detect a flush on her face, a trifle of confusion in her manner.

Perhaps she did not understand his objects as well as she thought. He suffered his gaze to rest on her face and contemplate it in silence. There are times when it is not hard to read the Sphinx—and this was one of them. He almost blushed himself.

"Because I needed aid myself; and because in you I recognized a kindred spirit."

"But what could you know of me? Up to this moment, so far as I can tell, we never met. We are utter strangers."

"Not so much so as you may think, and the surest proof is that you are here."

"And where in the name of Heaven is 'here'? I am tired of all this mystery and delusion. If I am confined in a lunatic asylum, say so. If you are doctor or patient tell me so, and which. If you are as good as you are beautiful you will befog me no longer."

"You may not know it, but once, months ago, I saw you. After that, with this in my possession you could never be far away."

From her breast she drew out a handkerchief which he recognized as possibly one of his own, long lost.

"Through that, when I remembered you again at the time I seemed to have need, I was able to draw you, to follow you step by step. What ostensible motive you might have, or what companions, I knew not, but of yourself I kept close track, and sent out the only messengers I had to lead you hither. If I had to use gentle force forgive me. Hereafter you shall move only at your own free will."

Calvert listened through this remarka-

ble explanation with a gradually deepening sense of awe. He did not yet know where he was, but the method of his arrival was even more important. No delusion this, since it fitted in too well with his own story. And if it was the truth, he knew he was as absolutely within the power of this woman as though he was a simple mass of potter's clay which she was moulding.

Beautiful she was, strong, masterful—but in that moment he feared her as he had feared nothing in all his life. True, she had promised him the freedom of his will; but he shrewdly suspected that would be only while his will ran along in the same line as her own. Yet, he showed none of this in his face, as, in a low voice he asked:

"Where am I now?"

"Where you have sought to be—in the ruined remnant of prehistoric civilization. In the castle of the unknown. In the house of the dead, which stands over the hidden river of the sunken canyon."

"In the house of the dead? Then these figures I have seen are but wraiths? You yourself are but a beautiful phantom? Forgive me if I am broken by the revelation. I stand, it seems as man never stood before, in the presence of the spirits."

He hardly knew whether the awe that he put in his tones was real or but a bit of acting.

"No, no! I am a living thing, as much so as yourself, though I have powers that sometimes even to me seem more than human. In the outside world you have seen something of the force I wield; you shall see more of it here. You have come seeking a treasure—you shall find it, and more. Together we will make these vaults render up the wealth which has been buried for ages, and which as yet we have barely tapped. If it be our choice, here we can found a kingdom. Everything is within our grasp, yours and mine."

She spoke with the enthusiasm of a prophetess, and her dark eyes glowed like living fire. The young man felt them taking possession of his soul. He gasped out:

"But we are not here alone—you and I. There are others. I have seen them. It was but a chance that I was not slain."

"Have no fears. No such danger shall come to you again. There was but one here whom I failed to control, and he—is gone. The rest are my slaves. They shall be yours. I lacked only one I could trust—and you are now here."

"Gone? Where?"

He asked himself the question with a chill, though he did not speak it aloud. Something of his thoughts the singular woman appeared to read.

She waved her hand between them.

"Forget all that. There is such chance for you as man never had. Wealth without end, a kingdom for the founding of it. A refuge the world can never reach, and subjects man cannot conquer. Are you with me?"

She held out her hand toward him, and he knew it was his for the grasping, but he folded his arms, with a stern resolve to retain his will, and answered:

"There is blood on it. I dare not take it until I know more."

"You shall know more. You shall know all. By means of my powers I learned of this place, and came hither. I found it occupied as a refuge by men who knew not its secret. To use them, and to secure my own safety, I had to tell them something of the truth, and share with them a tithe of the treasure."

"Even that was not lost. Much of it has been spent in refitting this retreat—the rest is still in the treasury. Only one of them could hold out against my power, and he was the brute who had ruled before my coming. For a time we divided the sovereignty, but there came a moment when it was his life or mine—and with mine would have gone yours. I fought for us both—and won. Blame me if you dare."

She mastered him after all. As her hot glance darted into his eyes he gave up the contest, and enclosed her hand within his own.

"As you will. I am but clay in your hands, mould me as you wish."

"Spoken well. Never shall you regret. I cannot explain more to-night, for the others must be prepared for the new order; and that will only take a little time. Let me lead you back to the quarters you first occupied. To-morrow you shall know all the hidden secrets of the place."

Though his soul was in arms against it he bowed his head in acquiescence, the door opened before them, and she led the way through the empty corridor.

"Perhaps I may be able to show you our kingdom later on. If not, good night."

And thus, with a wave of the hand, she left him, to his confused thoughts.

CHAPTER X.

THE STORY OF A KING.

Saul Sanders knew well enough that he had stumbled across a mystery and a crime.

He had little time to think the matter over, but it had come to him like a revelation that the underground stream had taken him to the building he had seen at sunset; and that the place had unexpected inhabitants, who might not receive him after a friendly fashion.

He was wise enough to see that the man he had rescued was at present on the losing side in some internal dissension, and would have liked to know something more about what had been done before going further.

At the same time, almost any guide was better than none at all, and he felt that, for the present at least, he could hold his own with all in sight. He kept his eyes open for treachery—for he did not altogether trust this dripping Hercules—and intended to worm out of him what information he could at the earliest practicable moment.

Until that time, perhaps it was best not to think at all in regard to what he had found. He devoted himself to his patient; and without meeting a soul, the two crept slowly through the passages until they reached a spot where the man seemed to believe himself to be safe. He threw himself down upon a couch, and left Saul to look around in amazement at the room and its furnishing.

After a time, however, the strength of the late moribund appeared to return, and he gazed sharply at the youth.

"How did you get here, young man?" was his question. "If you had been brought in by Edna you would hardly have come to my rescue."

"Rest easy on that, old man. Nobody brought me. I just dropped in. I found the valley by chance, saw a castle in the distance, and would have come down in the morning, to explore around a little; but you can bet high on it that if I had had the say-so, I wouldn't have come in exactly this way."

"Dropped in, eh? You must mean something by that."

"I mean just what I say, for I never

would have taken the jump into the sunken canyon of my own free will. One minute I was nosing around in the starlight; the next I was drifting down the stream that flows below. I had just crawled out when your friends brought you along in a sack, and dumped you in, regardless. I'm one of those unlucky wretches that always must take up for the under dog in a fight, and so I took up for you. Now, I'd like to know where I am, and what's going on here."

"Sounds like the truth," said the man, rubbing his beard thoughtfully. "Yet, how did you come to find this valley at all? What brought you here?"

"What brings most men to such hidden spots in the desert? An idle tale, perhaps. Some cheap jest, told around a campfire. For every such retreat there is a story of rich placers or a hidden treasure. I am no different from the rest. I searched, and I found."

The truth seemed to Saul to fit the case best. No other reason came to his mind, and he was not afraid to tell it. He began to think this adventure was a larger one than he could handle by himself, and it might be well to try and make terms with the man he had saved.

"You found too much," said the man, gloomily.

"We are first on the spot, and hold all we found."

"Strikes me that your pards are not exactly the right stripe to tie to. Hadn't you better draw a moist pen slick through and start fresh? Come! I have done you a good turn; do me one. I am not the only person who has heard of this spot. It will not be long before you have your hands full."

"What good turn I can do you I will. Swear to stand by me and I will make you one of the sharers in this kingdom."

"Much in it?"

"Millions. More than any one suspects, perhaps, save yourself—and one other. It is all ours, and we'll have it if we have to fight for it."

He shut his teeth hard, and shook his fist savagely. Saul thought of Plant-hunter and his young charge, and wondered if they had fallen into these hands. He had entirely forgotten them until a moment ago. It was hardly safe to allude to them, yet he could not help wishing to find out if his strange companion knew anything of their disappearance. He doubted it; and if not he might make terms for the two, and perhaps be giving him a valuable hint.

At the same time, he knew how uncertain was the hope, and he hesitated:

"I don't mind taking shares in a stock company for developing an Aztec ruin, and keeping out intruders, so far as mining law and the rule to treasure trove will allow. I am as warm after wealth as the next man. But up to the present time I have lived an honest life, and never run foul of the law. I intend to keep on in the same lines. How does that platform suit your royal highness?"

"It is all right for those who care to live on it, but it will never bring a man a million. Yet, I like you, boy, and I'll give you one more chance. Swear that when the time comes you cannot fight for me and us you will not be against us, and that whatever you may learn while here as my friend and guest will remain an untold secret. Do this, and for a time, at least, I can trust you, and when you go away it will not be empty handed. If we meet the success I dream of, you shall have a share such as you could never have obtained had you been free to work here alone. And, by the way—are you alone? Tell the truth. It shall be all the better for you. If I

find you have been deceiving me, all promises made are off, and I will forget you saved my life."

One of the talonlike fingers thrust the threat at Saul.

The question and the threat, however, found him prepared.

"That's for you to make out. I told no one of my plans. I started alone. I entered this valley alone. I arrived here alone. Outside of yourself, there is no one knows in all this wide world that I am in or under this castle of the ages."

"That is enough—if you are telling the truth, as I believe you are."

"Don't be too sure of that. On the way I touched more than one whose feet were turned in the same direction. Perhaps you know something of them?"

"When you reached this were they before or behind you?"

The cold way in which the question was asked convinced Sanders his statement was not a surprise, and that something was to be learned from this man, who was now almost himself again.

"If I know anything about it they were all before me."

"Who were they, and what did you know about their objects?"

"I can't tell you as much as they might if they were willing to talk. First, there was a young man I met beyond, on the edge of the desert. Never saw him before, but we sort of cottoned to each other, and tramped along together till the next night. We laid down to rest, and when I woke up he was gone. That was the last of him."

"Ah, the man who could find his way here ought to be able to see a trail, even in the desert, and you do not seem like one who would accept such a disappearance without trying to account for it."

"If eyesight goes for anything, he slipped away through the solid rock. The way I felt, I half believed the whole thing, man and all, was a dream, and I let it go at that. Out on the sand a fellow sees queer things at times, and knows enough to smile and pass on."

"True. And the others?"

"A man and a girl. They were camped at the head of the valley. The man had visited this country years ago, and was guiding the other, who was, I take it, seeking something besides treasure. They disappeared just as mysteriously as my other friend had done. It was while I was looking for them that I tumbled into the river through an opening in the rocks. The men can take care of themselves. That's what they are men for. But if you have harmed the girl—you and I will fight."

The threat was coolly made, without any overbearing insolence, and did not seem to anger the listener. He answered slowly:

"I know nothing of the girl, but there is one who does, and before the night is over I will have the truth from her lips. Stop! I have seen one of them. I understand now. Edna brought him here herself. The traitress! I might have known."

"Who is Edna, if it is a fair question?"

"It is a long story, boy, and one I would not care to tell if I did not trust you. To shorten it up it would sound something like this:

"I and a dozen or more men found our way into this region. There were a hundred mounted men in blue after us, promising ropes or bullets, as we might chose, but we preferred starvation and thirst, so we pushed ahead, and dropped them in the desert. Perhaps they never went back. We have made no search, and their bones never were found by us."

"Perhaps they are saying the same thing of you."

"All the better. It was a year ago. We found what we had not dreamed of, and though it was a dangerous road we had to take to reach it, we saw how it could be used as a fortress and a hiding place. When we had gone from one end to the other, as we imagined, we thought of it as nothing else. Then, Edna came up, out of the ground at our feet."

"And who is she?"

"A witch. A woman with strange powers. She, and a man who seemed as much her slave as her servant, stalked boldly in among us."

"With them came the panthers, marvelously trained. Before long she told us strange things, and in the end had the men who had been mine almost as much her slaves as the one she had brought with her. All but me. She could not bend or break my will, with all her magic, and so we went along side by side. At her bidding they worked as men never worked—and found gold that seemed countless, though she held it as a drop in the bucket to the treasures she would unearth. She it was who sent them back more than once by a way she found for such supplies as we needed; she unearthed the wonderful secrets, one by one; she harnessed the stream in the hidden canyon, and turned it into light; she promised even greater things. All the time I doubted her, and though we worked together we were on guard. Tonight her chance came for a stroke, and she made it. It will be my turn next."

Saul looked at the speaker. If he had not just saved his life probably he would have seemed still more repulsive; as it was the self-declared outlaw looked forbidding enough. Yet, this confidence fascinated him. He was yearning to take part in the adventure. It was the most wonderful thing he had ever heard or imagined, and whatever this man had been, he appeared to be on the right side now. One thing more he had to say:

"Old man, I'm with you, if that is all straight goods; but I want to say a word for the girl I spoke of and her guide. They did not come on a treasure hunt, but she seeks her father, who, she believes, is here. It's ten to one she has fallen into this Edna's hands, and my first move would be to get her out of them. She mustn't come to any harm."

"Take the earth, youngster—if you can get it. That's always been my plan. I'll give you all I dare; and for the rest—we'll see. I must leave you here for a time, until I can see how the land lays. You will be safe enough, and might have worse quarters. Rest yourself until I return."

All his strength seemed to have come back to him, and he was little the worse after his marvellous escape from death.

Once having made up his mind, he did not hesitate on his going, and Saul found himself alone.

He did not altogether fancy the position of affairs, but there was a masterful way about his host which he did not think it well to resist. He might have felt dryer, and warmer, and less hungry; but this was so much better than drifting down the sunken river that he tried to be cheerful; and did not succeed badly.

By and by he heard, rather than saw, the door open. As instantly he slipped behind the curtains which hung on the sides of the room, and congratulated himself for his prudence when he heard a voice that he guessed rightly belonged to the mysterious woman he had heard called Edna.

It was simply a good-night she was saying, to some one she ushered into the

room. He peeped cautiously out from his hiding place, and to his surprise recognized Tom Calvert!

CHAPTER XI.

AHAB EARL.

"Great Scott, old man! How did you get here?"

With this exclamation Saul Sanders strode out from behind the curtain and advanced toward his whilom friend.

The surprise was as great on the other side, and the two stared at each other, though Calvert recovered himself first.

"Ask me something easy. All I know is that I arrived. But I'll swear I would just as soon I was somewhere else. This is too near the infernal regions to suit me."

"Haven't seen anything of Planthunter and the young lady since you left without saying good-by?"

"Not a thing. I hope to heavens this is not the spot they are aiming at."

"It is just that same; and if I can guess at anything of the facts in the case, I should say the lady at the door knows something about her."

"I hope not. What do you know about them; and how do you come to be here? Quick! Tell me all about it."

Saul did not hesitate, but gave a swift outline of his adventures since striking the valley, down to the rescue of the man in the sack. Even though Calvert might have gone over soul and body to the mysterious Edna, he could not see any reason for keeping back what had happened.

When he had briefly sketched it all he stood back, to note how Calvert took it.

"It looks as though you had the best chance to get what you came for," was Tom's gloomy answer.

"I swear, I forgot to ask the queen of these infernal regions whether she knew anything about a brace of wanderers whose faces were set this way. Perhaps it was just as well. There is a revolution going on in this kingdom, and the less attention is called to any one the better. My own head hardly rests too well on my shoulders, though I'd back my chances against yours. Before this thing is done with, the chances are both of us will go up the flume."

"That comes from being on both sides of the question at issue. My man is not a very good one to look at, but I should say he was powerful as a fighter, and built to stay."

"I know. I have seen him. He intruded here, and I had the pleasure of knocking him endways. When he gets the chance, he will repay the blow of the fist with a stroke of the steel. I might, perhaps, plead your cause with the woman you call Edna if—"

"If it was not that the moment she gets on to the interest you have been taking in a certain Arla Earl you'll have to be looking out for your own neck. Whichever side comes on top, it is going to be bad for one of us; and most likely both. The only thing I see is to join forces and make a fight against everything in the ring."

"No use to think of escape."

"Not a bit. I don't budge until I get my hands into the treasure somewhere near to the elbows. It's as much mine as any one's."

"And I don't go until I find Arla, or know she is beyond help."

"All the same, it looks like murder to strike in against the man I saved, and that is what they ought to call it."

"And it is the same way about the Queen of the Sunken Canyon."

"Right you are, though from what I have picked up, they both deserve all they will get."

"Hist! Some one comes."

They heard the shooting of the bolt preparatory to the opening of the door, and without hesitation both disappeared behind the curtains.

It might be the king, or it might be the queen, who was approaching. Whichever it was, there was one prisoner too many in the room. Peeping cautiously out at the man who advanced into the room, they saw he bore a tray, and Calvert concluded Edna had not forgotten his fast of the day.

He slipped out and stood between the man and the door.

"You are Ahab," he said, as the individual turned and gazed into his face.

The man nodded acquiescence.

"Ahab—who? You have another name. I am curious to know more of those who befriend me."

"Ahab Earl."

"Father to Arla Earl. Heavens! I guessed it."

The name appeared to have a magical effect. The eyes of the listener brightened; he made a step forward.

"Yes. My daughter. What know you of her? Did she send you? Tell me of her! Oh, I have dreamed of this! How did you know me? Where is she? Can it be that she has heard?"

With tongue loosened by those few words, his questions rolled out one after the other, never a wait for an answer as he reached out and clasped the hand of the young man.

"Yes, she has heard. I do not know her, but I know of her. A friend saw her not long since. The letter you dropped into the canyon, enclosed in a bottle, drifted out into the gulf, and was picked up by one who never opened it, but sent it, enclosed in another envelope, addressed as yours was."

"And you—you were the man who found the floating bottle?"

"I was. I followed up the letter, curious to learn its meaning. It must have contained some injunction to secrecy, for I heard nothing of its real contents till long after. I only knew the young lady started on some dangerous quest, under the guidance of a man she sought out, and that she refused to take a warning which I tried, in all good faith, to give her. How I came here myself I hardly know; but I believe that she is also within these walls, a prisoner to the woman who governs here. If so, you must help her, and be sure that if my chance comes to aid her I will not be backward."

"Here? Surely, not here? She would never have been so mad! A fate worse than death! Ah, coming!"

The intelligence died from his face with a suddenness that was startling, and he turned away as though he had heard nothing. Before Calvert could recover from his surprise, the visitor had glided from the room, and the door had closed behind him.

"Saul, did you ever hear anything stranger?"

As he spoke, Calvert turned toward the curtain behind which he believed his friend was concealed.

There was no answer. In fact, he was alone in the room! While he conversed with Ahab, Sanders had taken the opportunity of the open door, and had quietly disappeared.

What was the meaning of it? Was he to be entirely deserted? Calvert shrugged his shoulders at the thought, and seated himself at the meal that was before him. He was ravenously hungry.

"King or Queen?" he muttered to himself a little later, as he heard once more the shock of the hidden bolt, as it was forced back from its socket.

He cocked his revolver, laid it on the table beside his plate, and went on eating.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE LAIR OF THE TIGERS.

It was a sudden instinct which caused Saul Sanders to slip away.

He was every whit as hungry as Calvert, and was also interested in the conversation with Ahab; but when he saw a chance to pass the portal beyond which it was not safe to go, yet behind which danger was likely to find him, he did not hesitate.

As yet he knew nothing about the interior of this venerable building, save what he had seen on the way from the canyon below to this spot. He wished he had asked some questions when he had the opportunity. Not having done so, he had to explore for himself.

He went noiselessly along the hall, following the same course as that lately taken by Calvert. Before going far he looked back over his shoulder, and saw Ahab making his exit.

At that he looked around for a hiding place; but could see none. Either he must fight it out, or must run for it; and he chose the latter course.

In a moment he had turned the angle, and was peeping back at Ahab from around the corner.

Ahab saw nothing of this, and moved blindly toward the spot. Further flight was necessary; and seeing the stairway down which Calvert came so near to tumbling, he dodged down that, his hand on his revolver.

He did not go far, and, when Ahab passed on he stole back and followed him on tiptoe. It was a wonderful risk; but it was a time when such a one should be taken. It probably meant life or death to know—or not to know—what was going on.

There was little of elegance about this stone monument of the past.

It was built after the simplest order of architecture, so far as arrangement was concerned. Plain hallways ran through the centre of it, and the rooms were on either side. To be sure, the masonwork was all marvelously well done, and so pointed off that, though doubtless joints were systematically broken, yet everywhere his eyes seemed to meet solid walls. He doubted if he could go back and find the opening by which he had left the room where the dwarf Hercules had placed him.

"Nice place to nose around without some sort of a guide," he thought to himself.

"Don't seem to be any way to get out to the open, and no telling when a door will swing, and some one pop out on you. What I would like to know is whether this is the garret, basement, or somewhere betwixt and between. If the lights went out on a fellow, and he was in a hurry to get out, it would be a mighty bad show."

Of course, he was careful not to get too near his involuntary guide, and all the time was watching him carefully.

He was confident of being able to find his way back to the underground river; and had decided that in case of discovery and pursuit he would retreat in that direction. If hard pressed, he would take to the boat, and trust himself for a time to the uncertain current of the stream.

He was not at all anxious for such an adventure, however, and when he saw his unconscious guide halt, he paused himself.

Ahab knocked thrice upon the centre of a stone on the wall, and after waiting a moment knocked twice more, striking with the haft of a knife he drew from his belt.

Would he go in, or would he first look around? If he did the latter he was almost certain to see Saul, and it was only the far-away appearance of the man that induced Sanders to run the risk.

The door opened, and without a particle of hesitation Earl went in.

"Neck or nothing," thought Saul; and silently, but with swift steps, glided to the spot where the man had disappeared.

He had been almost certain the door did not close again; and found he had not been mistaken.

The opening was but partially closed. He heard voices within.

"You have stayed long; why?"

"Pardon, madame. He spoke to me and I could but answer."

"He said?"

"He asked after a man and woman who came hither, and who, he thinks, are prisoners."

"He did?"

The exclamation was one of angry surprise.

"Good heavens! can this girl be anything to him? I thought they were but a pair of meddling fools, and hesitated what to do with them. Better to have left them to the tender mercies of the brutes. And you? What answer did you make him?"

"I said I had not seen them. Then, you called me, and I came away."

It was the truth he spoke, as far as it went, but he might have told much more. Perhaps it was some thought in her own mind which controlled his speech. Certainly, if she had pressed him he would have given word for word precisely what Tom Calvert really did say. It may be it was the will of Saul Sanders, who was listening with interest, and who understood only too well the strange powers of the remarkable woman.

He waited eagerly for what was to come next.

"It is not too late to rid ourselves of them; and out of sight they will be out of mind. You, Ahab, waking or dreaming, here or elsewhere, will forget you have ever seen or heard of them. Remember. Follow me. I may have need of your knife."

She was going to leave the room, and Saul looked around him in some dismay.

If they came out of that door nothing could save him from being seen, and while he did not doubt his being able to hold his own, armed as he was with a revolver, there was no telling what reinforcements the sounds of a struggle might bring to the scene.

With his hand on the handle of his pistol, he awaited the discovery.

It turned out that it was not now to come.

A moment later he heard her voice, but it was further off, and less distinct. She was leaving the room by some other way.

Saul sighed with satisfaction.

"All right, my lady. I'm in the ring to find out all I can discover, and there's not a better spot to learn wisdom than right here. If you will be kind enough to leave that back door open also, I'll be pleased to give you the benefit of my company for the ensuing interview. Steady, now. Here goes."

With cautious hand he pushed the door still further open, and entered the room.

The apartment, in size and furnishing, resembled much the one in which he had left Calvert. There were a few feminine nick-nacks, showing this was the abiding place of a woman, but the occupant seemed to run to the practical rather than the luxurious.

He advanced still further, looking this way and that in search of the route to what he knew lay beyond, but the sight which met his eyes was one on which he had not counted.

From separate corners of the room stepped certain friends he had almost forgotten, and whom he had no desire to see again.

The panthers rose up, yawned, and moved toward him with a silence that was fascinating.

A few steps they moved, and then crouched together, as if for a simultaneous spring.

CHAPTER XIII.

WITHOUT MERCY.

With her rear guarded by four such allies, Edna had little fear of what she left behind her, and would not have returned to remedy the mistake had she been aware the door had been left open.

She was most thoroughly the master of the secrets of this building, and she and Ahab alone knew the hidden way by which she made her exit from the room. It was in utter darkness now, as she stepped lightly down the stone stairway; but there was no hesitation in her movements.

A score of steps she counted, and then, knowing she was once more on the level, turned to the right, and sought the wall for guidance.

Ahab had followed the same way more than once, but had he been an utter stranger to it little difference would that have made. He moved through no volition of his own. When Edna halted he came to a stop, but it is doubtful if he understood why. Never was possession more complete.

A door opened to her touch, and the two passed into a huge, arched chamber, dimly lighted by the rays of a single lantern.

In one corner were two figures, which moved slightly as she approached. Planthunter and Arla Earl were there.

Planthunter attempted to spring to his feet; but there was the rattle of a chain, and he sat down again with more vigor than grace.

Arla never moved a particle.

Queen Edna caught up the lantern, and held it so the light would fall full on the face of the young girl, slowly reading every line of those features, which she could not help but see were beautiful.

For a little she stood thus, her eyes glittering with hate, the fingers of her free hand working involuntarily, as though they clutched a dagger.

Standing behind her, Ahab allowed his eyes to rove over the prisoners without showing a spark of more than the idlest curiosity. To all intents and purposes he was a thing of springs and hinges, moved solely by a master hand. He even paid no attention to the words Queen Edna was speaking.

"Girl, I ask you for the last time, why have you come here?"

"And I answer, because my feet wandered in this direction. If you asked it over a thousand times, I would say nothing else."

"Because that much the worst fool would know. There was a mystery behind that answer, as I knew from the first, and it was only when I had half

solved it that it became dangerous. Tell the whole truth, if you hope to live."

Arla folded her arms, and closed her lips tightly. If looks could speak, they said, "I accept the danger; do your worst."

"You have found your way here, and if I turned you loose, no promise you made would keep you from seeking the spot again. Only, the next time you might bring a larger force with you. I dare not keep you here—if it was only for your own sake. The interests at stake are too great to hesitate. You—must go away."

She hesitated, and though she tried to soften her concluding words, they fell from her lips as a threat. With one hand outstretched, and pointing at the prisoner, she waited, as if to learn their effect.

They fell idly. Here was another subject who was proof against her marvelous powers.

"You do not answer. So much the worse for you. Take charge of her, Ahab!"

Her servant, her tool, and her slave stepped forward.

"Take charge of her, and do as I order. We will give the fool one chance. After that, she and fate for it. As for this poor fool here, there is little danger in him, but we may have to dispose of him later on. Leave him where he is."

"Fool yerself, ye old witch fiend. Ef yer knows what's good fur ye, don't try none ov er black art on me. An' ef yer hurt a hair on that leetle one's head thar'll be a reckon' fur ett sich ez you won't like ter meet."

"That is right. Snarl if you please; you are fixed so you cannot bite. Ahab, away with her."

Ahab and Arla looked at each other, the man moving still closer, and reaching out his hand. There was a look of unconcern about his face. She might have been a block of wood, so far as his feelings were concerned.

Not so with Arla. As the name of the man fell on her ears, she bent forward, her hands clasped, peering up into the stern, but otherwise emotionless, face above her, her own growing whiter and whiter.

He put out his arms and clasped her around the waist, with a grip from which she did not shrink.

Then, her splendid nerves gave way, and, throwing up her arms, she gave a great cry and fainted.

Queen Edna looked at the two suspiciously, but there was no sign in the face of the man that he was moved. At that moment she forgot that he saw only with the eyes which she gave him. She led the way, the lantern in her hand, while Ahab Earl followed, the body of the girl flung over his shoulder.

Planthunter, chained to the rock, was too wise to waste his breath in useless threats, or fruitless struggles, but he closed his teeth hard, as light, and slave, and captive, and queen vanished, and he was left alone in the darkness.

"Fainted, hev yer, girl? Ef that wretch are ter w'uk her wicked will, better fur you ef yer never opens them eyes ag'in. Ter think ov ett. Better be old Planthunter, settin' hyer in the black night, awaitin' starvashun an' death, than ter git ag'in face ter face with ther awful truth. Wonder ef that devil couldn't 'a' knowed. P'rhaps I made a mistake in not a shoutin' ett out. Ef I did, Lord furgive me. I kept silent fur ther best."

While he thought thus, he bowed his face to his knees and continued to stare as it seemed to him at the vanishing light, and the nerveless victim borne

away to the slaughter upon her father's shoulder.

"After the day's toil they sleep well; and it is well that it is so. My slaves are well in hand, and yet I cannot always be sure. This is one of those things to which I want no witnesses. Ahab I can trust, but with some of the rest I am never altogether sure. They have been seeing with their own eyes, rather than mine, and their memories are not altogether in my keeping."

In this fashion the woman muttered to herself as she went on, leading the way through an arched hallway, which seemed to be cut out of the solid rock rather than built by mason's art.

Not a soul met them; and after a time they came out into the white light that flooded a broader passageway, and shone out upon the river.

She saw no traces of the dripping garments which had trailed across the quay since she had been there, and the boat rocked lazily at the end of its chain.

"Ahab!"

"Here, mistress."

"What is it you are going to do?"

"As you say. I have no other will."

"The fool is dangerous to both you and me, yet I give her a chance for life. Would you have it so?"

"As it pleases you."

"You are going to tie her hands and feet yet more securely."

"It is done."

"Draw up the boat and place her in."

Without a word in response Ahab gravely drew up the boat, giving the chain a closer hitch, to hold it to the wharf.

Arla gasped, and moved slightly, but he never seemed to notice it, as he placed her softly in the vessel, and waited for the next order.

"Cut loose and let it go."

The chain was unhitched, and the boat drifted slowly down with the current. Arla's head arose weakly from the bench on which it was resting, and then dropped down again. Perhaps the motion whirled away her senses, for once more she was motionless.

"You came a day or so too late," said Edna, folding her arms, and watching the craft float away toward the gloom below.

"I might have made terms with you before I had seen him. Now, there can be no terms. If fate saves you, I die. One or the other of us—which will it be?"

A mocking laugh closed the question, and the boat, feeling more and more the current, glided into the deeper shadows.

"Too late—or else too soon. A day or two later, when the last blast has been fired, and I know the best, or the worst, I might not care to take such chances. The chances of the darkness, the waterfall, the sunken channel, with its jagged rocks; and she bound hand and foot! What chances are there? It is certain as fate. She goes to her death!"

She said the words firmly, as though caring nothing for the man who crouched before her, watching the craft with eyes as eager as her own; but at the moment there came something she did care for, and she turned, with a face which had suddenly become whiter, while her hand went to her bosom.

Up in the hallway, somewhere, she heard a hoarse roar which she recognized, and the noise of running footsteps.

As she stared up the passage she saw rushing toward her a young man, whom she recognized just in time.

It was Tom Calvert. In his wake followed the one man in all the earth she

least thought to see, since to that moment she had believed he slept eternally under the waters of the canyon.

How had he escaped? How had he come upon her guest? She shifted her aim from the young man to him, and as her finger lingered on the trigger of the pistol she had drawn, Calvert rushed past her and flung himself into the water, turning his face down stream, and swimming with strong, sturdy strokes.

She called to stay, that he was safe, and as she called she shot.

As if an answering echo, there came a roar, a shaking, and—darkness. She fell forward on her face, and even as she fell she felt the fingers of her foe at her throat.

CHAPTER XIV.

CYCLONE SAUL TAKES THE TRAIL.

Saul Sanders was as cool a warrior as could be found, and did not force the fighting when he saw the unsuspected enemy about him.

Planthunter had explained something about these brutes, while he knew considerable in regard to them from personal experience.

To be sure, up to this time they had always sought him, and there was no telling how they would take a reversal of the tactics. Had four men been moving upon him, he would no doubt have shot without hesitation. Instead, now, he threw himself upon the couch, which was convenient, and glanced carelessly at his confronters.

"Oh, come, now!" he chaffed, in a laughing tone; "where is the madam? She and I are friends, don't you know, and I just dropped in by special invitation. Best go slow till you hear what she has to say about it."

He waved his hand gently as he spoke, and his voice seemed to hold them at bay. They looked at him doubtfully, but he felt sure the immediate danger was over. Perhaps, even, they might by and by allow him to retire in good order—which he did not intend to be slow about doing when the chance came.

"Going to take good advice, are you? That's right. Let me know when she comes. I'm not sure but what I'll take a doze while I'm waiting."

He lounged back more easily still. If these things were pets, as well as servants, they might be willing to allow the very liberties he should not think of taking.

So he reasoned; nor was he mistaken. They crouched around him for a time, as though he was not forgotten, and presently he was more at his ease than they seemed to be. They arose, looked at the open door, and then at him. In their own silent way they were again asking him to follow.

"Quite a genteel hint that they want to turn me out. Blessed if I don't think I had better take it. All right, my friends. I'll go if you are willing."

He arose from his lounging position, yet had not altogether understood their purpose. They led the way through the open door, but did not intend to stop there. They went on, from time to time looking back over their shoulders, to see if he followed.

He shrugged his shoulders at the invitation, which he did not think it expedient to refuse, and they went on down the stairway on which Saul had taken refuge when watching Ahab.

From their actions, he began to think they were hunting for their mistress, for they sniffed here and there, as if in search of a trail, but all the time trotted along with some definite point in view.

The stairway led to what seemed to be the lowermost part of the castle—to the cellar, in fact.

The workmanship was more careless than above, and there was evidence that modern hands had been at work here.

"Looking for the treasury, I reckon," thought Saul.

"Mighty good thing I didn't have to take the contract all by my lonesome self. Looks as though a dozen had been at work; and blamed hard work, too. Couldn't have moved all that rock in five years. Wonder if they know what they are going for? Perhaps my friends here won't object if I view the prospect o'er. What's that wire for? Ah. Reckon it's a blast, all ready to be put off the first thing in the morning. Wouldn't be half bad to set it off now, and blow the whole thing to never-come-back."

His guess was a shrewd one, though he had no real idea of firing the little mine which he imagined lay there.

He would have been puzzled to know how to go about it. Though he understood the building was lighted by electricity, obtained by utilizing the current of the hidden river, he knew little of the principles behind it, and cared less.

Yet, it would have been easy to have made a connection through the wire he had discovered, and he was wise when he carefully withdrew from what he could not help but suspect was a dangerous neighborhood.

The panthers stopped at a door, and looked nervously around; then they seated themselves. There was something beyond which they wished to see, and Saul, though a little uncertain under what control they might be, was willing they should be gratified. He stepped carelessly between them, and undid the fastenings.

The opened door revealed darkness beyond, and he hesitated to go further, until he saw a lighted lantern sitting just within the doorway.

He caught it up and followed his guides, impelled the more strongly by catching what he thought was the sound of a low moan.

Following in the direction whence the sound came, he found Planthunter, who looked up, and, recognizing Saul, uttered a snarl.

"Ah, you war ther traitor, war ye? Mout a guessed ye war in league with ther she demon when I seed ther witches a gamblin' along ez yer come down ther valley. Yer got 'em with yer yit. Hev yer kim ter slay? Better do ett while yer hev ther chance. Planthunter are a man ov peace; but ef he gits loose of this thar'll be a war sich ez er reads about. Rocks can't hide yer, ner distance save yer. I'll hev yer life, an' that ov ther black angel yer trains onder."

The old man was pretty near to being insane, and Saul listened with a great pity, knowing it would not be safe to go nearer until he had undeceived him.

"Planthunter, old man, you are away, off. I dropped into this infernal den while looking for you and Miss Earl. I come now to help you both, and I'll do it, too. The cats are mighty uncertain friends, and I am almost afraid to do anything while they are looking on. A fight would bring help to their side of the house. Just take it easy a few moments. Perhaps they will go further."

"You don't mean ett, boy! Yer tryin' ter fool old Planthunter, an' him a eatin' his heart out hyer, alone in ther dark. Oh, jist set me loose, so I kin even up with that woman ez runs this camp, an' I'll be yer slave tell death."

His tone was pleading, and as though

he hoped against hope, rather than believed.

"I mean it, right enough, so get that blood out of your eye. The kittens are going, after all."

Evidently the panthers had not found the object of their search, and wanted to go further. They looked at Saul inquiringly.

He nodded back to them.

"All right. I'm with you—as far as the workshop. I must get something to take off these chains; and to make things safe, I guess I'd better shut the door between us. You are too sweet for anything; but I'll swear I don't trust you."

Planthunter called to him, but he paid no attention. If the old man did not believe in the hint he had given, so much the worse.

After a little he came hurrying back; the panthers were no longer with him. The old guide gave a cry of joy as Saul attacked the chains. A few minutes later and the prisoner stood free.

"Quick! We must follow her!" he exclaimed, excitedly.

"She hez kerried Arly away ter death. Ef you'd on'y a come sooner! Most like ett's too late fur anything but vengeance."

He would have rushed away, but Saul restrained him.

"Easy, old man. We have to look a little out for ourselves. When I shut the door on the cats they seemed to think I had played it very low down on them. Perhaps they have gone on about other business, but my own idea is they are waiting just outside, ready to tell us what they think."

"Kill them! Kill them! They are witches, not fit to live."

"That's all very true, but what will they be doing? I suppose I may be able for them in a fight, if I can have the advantages my way; but just now they all seem to have them their way. Just pray they get into some little trouble on their own account. They were dancing around like young bulls in a china shop when I left—and it's not exactly the safest place to dance, with dynamite, and electric wires, and Satan knows what, lying around loose. You hear them snarl? It's an elegant place for them to make trouble, and I wouldn't wonder if they were to do it."

It seemed as though his words were prophetic, for almost as he spoke they heard from the other side of the door a hideous roar, the rock quaked under their feet, and they fell prone on the floor.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST BLAST.

"The blast!" said Saul, crawling up uninjured, but a good deal shaken.

"Those infernal imps have fired it off. We will be lucky if we're not shut up here for good. It sounded as though the whole shop was coming down."

Planthunter was up again, too. He knew nothing of the blast, but would linger there no longer. He himself tried the door, and found it opened readily.

Fortunately, the lantern was not extinguished, and cautiously they made their way back through the corridors, which were curtained with a darkness blacker than night. Somewhere the wires had been broken—never to be joined again.

Chance led them along into the passage which went to the water's edge, and beyond, in the blackness, they heard a cry, and the sounds of a struggle.

"Ett's Arly! They're killin' her! Git a move on!"

Planthunter caught his young friend by the arm, and they ran on down the

passage, holding the lantern before them, to make sure they stumbled into no pitfalls.

The lamp shot a cylinder of light before them, and in that way they saw, upon the edge of the wharf, two forms, locked in a life and death conflict!

While they looked the forms disappeared, and there was a splash in the water, not loud enough for them to hear.

When they came up to the spot where the struggling figures had been, they found a broad stain of fresh blood. Had they looked closer they might have seen, in the water behind them, a few bubbles of air. Of the two there was no other trace.

As they looked around them, and at each other, they heard a halloo come over the water, and Saul recognized it as the voice of Tom Calvert, who, in turn, believing he recognized the figures by the light of the lantern, but was not sure.

"Hillo yourself!" shouted back Sanders.

"We're right side up, but it's been touch and go. Where are you?"

"Who is with you?"

"Planthunter. There seems to have been a racket here of some kind, but there's no one else in sight. Come in!"

"I'm coming, and bringing Arla Earl with me."

At that moment the two heard a groan, and a man staggered forward out of the gloom at their side.

"Arla Earl! Who speaks that name? Where am I? Who are you?"

It was Ahab—Ahab, from whom the mental fetters were dropping away, and who knew nothing now of all that had passed since he hurried away from Calvert, in answer to the call of his queen.

Saul's revolver was ready for him, but Planthunter threw it up.

"Stiddy, boy!" he warned, in a low tone. "Ett's ther gal's father."

Meantime Calvert was pulling steadily against the stream, and the boat, in which, fortunately, the oars had been left when turned adrift, grated against the pier.

Arla had recovered her senses, and sprang out, swift and strong.

"I know, dear, better than you; have no regrets. I have found you."

So she said, as she threw herself into the arms of her father; and there was a low murmur of voices, as, forgetful of the others, they spoke of those things nearest their hearts.

Meantime, Calvert explained the situation as he understood it.

"When you left me to myself, I made the best of a bargain, and finished the meal myself that I thought would have to do for two. After a weary wait, I heard some one coming, and was wiser than I had been. I hid behind the curtains. When the door opened, and some one called, 'Saul, Saul!' I did not answer. It was your friend, the king."

"Come out, Saul!" he went on. "The witch is in the saddle, and is going to throw the girl into the river. The men are all herded above, except Ahab, and the kittens are shut in her own sanctuary. Now is the time to decide where this kingdom is going to stand. If you are with me, come on."

"He turned away in haste, leaving the open door, and did not heed my coming steps until I had shot past him. Then he did give a roar, as he recognized me, but I did not wait. The lady of the panthers saw me, too, and it was an even thing she did not take a pot-shot, and bring me down, but she recognized me in time, and turned her pistol from me to him, while I was willing to pass for a

coward to reach the water. I dodged by, jumped into the stream, overtook the boat, and here we are. What next?"

"Gather what plunder we can, and get out. The king is dead, the queen is dead, the kittens are dead; if we wait here another twenty-four hours, we'll be dead, too. When Ahab gets over his ecstasy we'll trust to him to show us any of the secrets of the place it will be safe to view, and then he may guide us out, if he can. I'll swear I have a little honest prejudice in favor of sunlight once in a while; and that is something which never comes here."

"But, in the upper stories—there must be a way out."

"There are no upper stories. That is, the infernal place is built so that those below will never know there is anything above; and those above will never find the regions below."

"But, there must be a way from one to the other."

"Oh, yes. And it's a heap good way. Supposing you find it. We might dig and blast for a hundred years. Ahab may know the way, but I doubt it. The knowledge was what gave Madame Edna her strength."

Saul Sanders had hit the history of the place fairly well. Had he reached the ruin from above, he would have found no way to the true mystery of the building, though he might have stumbled upon a gang of haggard, desperate men, who rested there from their labors, and guarded what they believed to be their share of the treasures already found.

Ahab himself did not know the secret of the hidden stairway which led upward, but he did lead them out from the channel of the hidden river.

Before going they explored well all the building that was open to them—and took away with them some wealth.

Yet, if Edna had prevailed, there would have been black disappointment for her.

The blast, fired by accident, laid bare the vault which no doubt she was striving to reach, and, so far as treasure was concerned, it was empty.

It was no great disappointment to them. Ahab was only too glad to escape with life and daughter, even though he had no remembrance of the terrible scenes when Arla came so near to death, and of which he was never reminded. Saul carried away, perhaps, as much as he had really expected to realize. Tom Clayton had wealth of his own, and besides that—had he not saved Arla at the last?

Verily, he was not to be without his reward.

THE END.

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